

## **MAG – 136 – The Puppeteer**

### **Content Warnings:**

- Degenerative illness
- Puppets
- Supernatural manipulation
- Mental illness
- Body horror

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

**JONATHAN SIMS**

Rusty Quill presents: The Magnus Archives. Episode one hundred and thirty-six.  
The Puppeteer.

**[Tape clicks on.]**

**ARCHIVIST**

—um, not really, I was just going to record a statement. Why?

**MELANIE**

Well, Daisy's been, um ... I've been keeping her company, while Basira's busy.

he's, um—

**ARCHIVIST**

Oh. No, I, uh, I know.

**MELANIE**

Well, I've kind of got to ... I've got somewhere to be. Do you mind if she hangs around with—

**ARCHIVIST**

Uh, I suppose ... Not at all. She's very welcome.

**MELANIE**

Great.

**ARCHIVIST**

**(Compelling)** If you don't mind me asking, where are you off to?

**MELANIE**

Therapy. Wait ...

**ARCHIVIST**

Oh, God, Melanie, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to ...

**MELANIE**

It's fine. I would probably have told you eventually anyway.

**ARCHIVIST**

Even so, I shouldn't—

**MELANIE**

Just forget it.

**ARCHIVIST**

It's good, though. I'm glad you're getting help.

**MELANIE**

Yes, well, we'll see. There's a lot of crap therapists out there.

**ARCHIVIST**

I guess. Still, it is a good step.

**MELANIE**

I suppose.

**ARCHIVIST**

You going to tell them the truth?

**MELANIE**

I don't know. It's all a bit ... y'know? Can we drop it?

**ARCHIVIST**

Of course.

**[Melanie opens the door]**

**MELANIE**

**(Calling out through the door)** Yeah, he's fine with it.

**[Door opens]**

**DAISY**

Alright?

**ARCHIVIST**

Yes. Are you ok?

**DAISY**

Yeah.

**MELANIE**

Right, anyway, I'm running late, so, er, thank you.

**ARCHIVIST**

Anytime.

**[Melanie leaves, shutting the door behind her]**

You alright?

**DAISY**

Asked me that already.

**ARCHIVIST**

Right. Sorry.

**DAISY**

I didn't ask her. To do that.

**ARCHIVIST**

It's fine.

**DAISY**

You're not babysitting me, alright? I know that's what the others think sometimes, but that's not it. I just don't like being on my own if I can help it. You know, flashbacks, panic attacks, the usual. Just trying to avoid it if I can.

**ARCHIVIST**

I know, Daisy. I do. It's hard.

**DAISY**

Yeah, well. Don't let me get in your way.

**ARCHIVIST**

Of course.

**[The Archivist clears his throat]**

Statement of Alison Killala, regarding her time as friend and carer to special effects artist, Neil Lagorio. Original statement given 1st December 2012. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, the Archivist.

Statement begins.

## ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

I loved Neil. I might even have been in love with him; it's hard to say. When there are so many emotions caught up in a single person, when they're such a significant force in your life, it gets difficult to say what's really there at the heart of it. His work, his art, defined my early life, as his friendship defined the last twenty years of it. One of my earliest memories is cowering behind my mother, watching *Labyrinth of the Minotaur* on our tiny television, seeing the clay of the creature move and come alive in stop-motion. It terrified me. It thrilled me. It's a moment that's never completely left me.

I've always had two passions: engineering and special effects. So naturally, the course of my life gradually led me towards working on animatronics. I don't care about the other stuff, not really. A squib's a squib, no matter how much you dress it up, and make-up never really wowed me. Even pyrotechnics, while impressive and visually spectacular, just didn't give me the same sharp joy as making something that could move, that came alive, directed and controlled by my hand. I always felt Frankenstein should have been an engineer, not a medical student, as reading that book, I couldn't help but see some of myself in that obsession. But I suppose everyone's already done the monster as a robot, haven't they? And none made it move as well as Neil did in 1975 when he worked on *Agents of Orion*.

That was one of his movies that I went back to time and again. The way the robot moved, the weight and life he managed to give each clanking, hissing step. I was 14 when I managed to hunt down a copy on Betamax, and I just watched that scene over and over again. I was already obsessed with Neil's work by then, mostly his sci-fi stuff from the late 70s: *Beyond Time*, *Under New York*, *The Crawling Ones*, all that sort of thing. His earlier stuff I certainly

enjoyed, but for all my fondness for that animated minotaur, his stop-motion work never really grabbed me like his animatronics. The way Neil tells it, he split from his partner, Gabe, in 1972, and sculpting for stop-motion had never really had the same charm after that. “Besides,” he always told me, “I’m a puppeteer at heart.”

That was certainly true. Neil never really talked about his early life, but sometimes, when the medication was kicking in, he would tell me about his training with puppets. I could never figure out what performance school he learned at, or even if he went to one at all, but he would twist his fingers into all sorts of bizarre and intricate shapes, until I could see the strings flowing over them. “We made them dance,” he would say, wonder and nostalgia in his voice. “Oh, how we made them dance!”

Growing up as an eighties cinephile and devotee of his art, I obviously had to learn to love horror. It wasn’t just his work with John Carpenter, either – it was common knowledge that Neil was deliberately seeking out darker and more grotesque works, though no-one knew why. *Dead Sky*, *The Nightmare Children*, *Forty Winks* – they were all in this period of his career, which culminated, of course, with *Toyshop*. While it’s now regarded as a cult classic, I still remember the editorials at the time condemning it, and some even called it “the end of Neil Lagorio.” I think it was too late to officially be a “video nasty”, but it was certainly referred to as such in the UK press. He told me later that he just needed to get it out of his system, though I don’t know if I entirely believed him.

Whatever the case, my own relationship with him started in 1992, on the set of *Jewel of the Amazon*, a mid-budget, effects-driven Kevin Costner vehicle. I’d been working in the industry only a couple of years by that point, and while I

had always dreamed of working with Neil Lagorio someday, it wasn't quite how I had always pictured it. The production was rushed, the budget was stretched, the direction was uninspired and Neil seemed broadly miserable. Despite this, or maybe because of it, we became friends. I think we bonded on that shoot, sheltering from the rain for hours at a time, watching a soggy animatronic jaguar gradually start to rust. I had to fight every instinct inside me, everything that wanted to burst out in admiration for his work and his profound effect on my life. But instead I chain-smoked and laughed, trying my best to come across as my hero's peer.

What was Neil Lagorio like? The question is harder to answer than I always thought it would be. In so many ways, he was his work. Conversations were usually about the current shoot, future projects or the most recent films of anyone he considered worth his attention. He had no time for whatever the issue of the day was, and despised Hollywood gossip and anyone who dealt in it. I will that say there was no warmth to him at all. He was not unpleasant or cruel, but beyond that you may as well have been talking to one of his steel and hydraulic creations. There were two sorts of people in the world, as far as Neil saw it: those who were worth his time, and those who were not. And if you were in the latter group, he honestly couldn't care if you lived or died. Not that most people could tell which side of the line they fell on. There were even days that I wasn't sure myself. Sometimes, I remember, he would invite people over to his studio that I was sure he hated, for screenings of his "original cuts". I was quite jealous of this at the time, as I'd never got such an invitation, but it was probably for the best. I didn't realise it back then, but those guests ... They never looked quite the same afterwards.

We stayed in touch over the next few years, even worked together on *The*



*Wire Runner*, his one underwhelming foray into CGI. He even kept in contact when I left to have my baby. It wasn't planned, but while I may not have had much time for make-up and monster suits, the bodies inside of them were a different matter. Anyway, even once I'd sorted out childcare arrangements, I found myself more and more unwelcome in the industry. It wasn't that people weren't willing to hire me, by this point I had a hell of a special effects resume, but the hours you were expected to be working, the way shoots were set-up, the culture of drinking and networking, none of it was really possible alongside parenting. I only really heard about Neil's work from what he told me: his disappointment at the directors' limited vision for the irradiated creatures in *Eagle Falls*, or his satisfaction with his latest (and as it turned out, last) foray into horror with *The Harvestmen*. He'd always had a fondness for spiders, he told me, and I of course reminded him that harvestmen weren't technically spiders.

It was around that time that he started to suffer his first symptoms. He told me later his greatest regret was not being able to finish his final film: an arthouse piece simply titled *Dancer*. He never explained what it was about, nor do I think it actually came out in the end. By the time it was due to start shooting, he'd already begun to seize up. I became his carer a few months later. It just seemed to make sense. A frugal life, lucrative career and prickly personality had left him with lots of money, but no real support; while my life had left me in a position where I cared deeply about his wellbeing and was in desperate need of money. Everything just lined up so neatly.

I will say this once, and you can draw whatever conclusions you wish from it. Neil Lagorio did not have Parkinson's disease. He began to have difficulty moving, yes, but his mind remained razor sharp at all times, and his growing

immobility at no point seemed to cause him any pain or discomfort. It was simply that, over the course of several years, he stopped being able to move under his own power. The doctors were never able to name it anything other than Parkinson's, and I'll admit I'm no expert, but I know they were wrong.

When it started, I was worried that Neil would take the loss of his work very hard. It had been all he was for so long, surely being unable to continue would devastate him. Instead, he threw himself into a new project, one I would never have expected, but that suited my engineering background perfectly.

Neil had devised a series of frames, ropes and pulleys, to be constructed in the rooms and corridors of his home. At the end of these ropes were hooks, which slotted into harnesses, again of his own design, that he wore on his wrists, his neck, his torso and his legs. When properly built and attached, it allowed me to move him, without a wheelchair or my own support. I could stand him up and walk him like a puppet.

I protested, of course. This man was my hero – I loved him – and there was no way I could subject him to this awful indignity. But my objections were ignored, as always, and Neil insisted that this was what he wanted. So, I built that strange contraption, using the skills I had developed across my whole life, to fill every corner of Neil Lagorio's house with wood and steel and cable. And when it was all done and I pulled him through his first, jerky standing motions, it did seem to make him happy. Pulling on those levers and cords, moving him step by stiff-limbed step through his house, it was the first time I had seen Neil smile in years.

And so that became our life. For almost a decade, I went to his home every day, strapped him up, and gradually puppeted my idol through whatever

strange, mimed parody of domestic life he desired. I still had to feed him, had to wash him, but he would always insist his arm be hoisted to his mouth before I fed him a sandwich, or that I correctly position him in the bath. And gradually, the surreal gave way to the mundane, and it simply became our life. I barely even noticed when the harnesses were no longer necessary, when the loops for those hooks were now embedded directly into his body. I must have asked him about it, but at the time it just seemed like such a natural progression.

It was almost six months ago when the woman came to our door. She looked like a film student, and at first, I took her for a fan. Neil's work wasn't the sort to attract adoring masses, but occasionally admirers would find their way to his home. Usually he'd send them away, but sometimes he'd have them wait in the atrium while I positioned him in his studio, ready for a short meeting or Q&A session. I was about to ask her to wait while I checked with him, but as I started to speak, she turned her head, revealing a mass of white thread criss-crossing all over the side of her temple, standing starkly against the dark brown of her skin. She told me to sit down, and I did. I heard the levers and pulleys move behind me, and I could tell that Neil was being walked down the corridor towards this woman, but I couldn't see. I couldn't turn my head, so I don't really know what his reaction was, but it didn't sound like one of fear or despair.

He called her Annabelle, and she sent me to his screening room. She told me I was to watch his original cuts. "Just until we're all done here," she said. And as I walked away from Neil, the last time I saw him alive, he was dancing, the cables shifting and moving him in a graceful, sweeping ballet. And he was crying with joy.

I don't know how long I was watching those films. They don't ... It was hard to

keep track of time. According to my daughter, I was missing for five months. When Annabelle let me out, Neil was dead. He was hanging there, wrapped in his strings like a cocoon, twisting gently around and around and around. She told me to take the films, his original cuts. She told me to come here. She told me to give them to you. I resisted for some time, but I'm done now. She's won. And I would very much like to go home.

**ARCHIVIST**

Statement ends.

Hm, Neil Lagorio ... You ever see any of his work?

**DAISY**

No. Not really into films.

**ARCHIVIST**

They were ... Well, let's just say it's not a complete shock there was something unnatural to them. Didn't know we had copies in the Institute, though, let alone original cuts. Records indicate they ended up in Artefact Storage.

**DAISY**

Probably best they stay there.

**ARCHIVIST**

Yeah ... Yes, of course. Annabelle Cane, though ... She worries me. I don't know. This is the second time she's turned up, uh, peripheral to the Institute.

**DAISY**

That you know of.

**ARCHIVIST**

Meaning what?

**DAISY**

She's Web. Spider's sneaky like that. Like that lighter you're always using – where'd you get that?

**ARCHIVIST**

Hm, good point. We should keep our eyes open. Anyway, how's Basira doing? I haven't seen her much since ... Well, she seemed a bit tense the last few times we spoke. How are you guys doing?

**DAISY**

No, Basira, she's ... She's been good. We're together, so it's good. Wish she didn't keep treating me like a china doll. But it's alright.

**ARCHIVIST**

It's understandable, I suppose.

**DAISY**

Yeah, well, what do you think? You think I'm weak just cos I'm not already chasing the next kill? You think I'm less me?

**ARCHIVIST**

I ... I don't feel like I'm exactly in the best place to judge the intersection between free will and humanity. Still trying to figure that out myself.

**DAISY**

John ... When you went in the coffin, was it you choosing to do that? Did you actually think you could save me or was something telling you to do it?

**ARCHIVIST**

It was me. I was drawn to it, I'll admit, but it was my decision. It wasn't entirely about you, though.

**DAISY**

What was it?

**ARCHIVIST**

My— My memories of the coma are not clear, but I know I made a choice. I made a choice to become ... something else. Because I was afraid to die. But ever since then, I don't know if I made the right decision. I'm stronger now, tougher, I can ... If I do die, now, or get sealed away somewhere forever, I don't know if that's a bad thing. And I don't want to lose anyone else, so if I can maybe stop that happening and the only danger is to me ... I'll do it in a heartbeat. Worst case scenario, the universe loses another monster.

**DAISY**

That's messed up.

**ARCHIVIST**

**(Laughs)** Yeah. I suppose it is.

**DAISY**

Did you know the coffin wouldn't kill you?

**ARCHIVIST**

I guess I thought imprisonment wouldn't ... wouldn't be as bad as it was. And it's a lot easier to make that choice than it is to actually endure the result. You might have noticed, when I was in there with you, I had regrets.

**DAISY**

Yeah, I remember.

**ARCHIVIST**

Plus, I thought ... Well, I didn't know what being down there had done to you.

**DAISY**

You thought I was going to kill you?

**ARCHIVIST**

It was a possibility.

**DAISY**

Guess so.

**ARCHIVIST**

Daisy?

**DAISY**

Hm?

**ARCHIVIST**

It's ... Uh ... Weird question, but I haven't seen you in my dreams the last couple of weeks?

**DAISY**

Oh. No. I work here now. Figured it seemed to protect the others, so—

**ARCHIVIST**

Oh. Right. So, wait, did you talk to Lukas or—

**DAISY**

Broke into Elias' old office. Found an employment contract. Filled it in and signed it.

**ARCHIVIST**

And that worked?

**DAISY**

Seems so.



**ARCHIVIST**

And you're not worried about...?

**DAISY**

Basira's trapped here. So are you. Not like I'm going anywhere anyway.

**ARCHIVIST**

I suppose not. So ... no more dreams.

**DAISY**

Not of you and your weird eyes. Just the coffin.

**ARCHIVIST**

Is that better?

**DAISY**

It's mine.

**ARCHIVIST**

Right.

**DAISY**

You need to stop moping.

**ARCHIVIST**

I what?

**DAISY**

You need to stop swanning around being all sad.

**ARCHIVIST**

I am not swanning around.

**DAISY**

“Boo hoo, I’m so alone and a monster!”

**ARCHIVIST**

I am alone. Martin is—

**DAISY**

Busy doing paperwork. Not like he’s dead. Besides, he’s not the only other person here y’know. There’s me, Melanie, Basira ...

**ARCHIVIST**

Traumatised, traumatised and paranoid. Because of me.

**DAISY**

Get over yourself. You’re always talking about choices. We all made ours. Now I’m making a choice to get some drinks in. Coming?

**ARCHIVIST**

I don’t ... Yeah, ok.

**DAISY**

Melanie's out, but I'll go get Basira.

**ARCHIVIST**

Is she ... Would she want to join us?

**DAISY**

If she doesn't, I'll rip her throat out.

**ARCHIVIST**

Uhhh...

**DAISY**

It's a joke, John.

**ARCHIVIST**

**(Dubious)** Oh, aha. Yes. I'll get my coat.

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

**THERAPIST**

Right, have a seat. Do you mind if I record our sessions?

**MELANIE**

I do mind, yes.

**THERAPIST**

Oh, I mean, it's just for my own notes.

**MELANIE**

I categorically and completely do not give consent for you to make any recording of me, ever. Turn it off. Please.

**THERAPIST**

I, I see. Yes, of course.

**[Tape clicks off.]**

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

The Magnus Archives is a podcast distributed by Rusty Quill and licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial Sharealike 4.0 International licence.

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

It featured: Jonathan Sims as the Archivist, Lydia Nicholas as Melanie King, Fay Roberts as Daisy Tonner, and Helen Gould as the Therapist.