

MAG 164 — The Sick Village

Content Warnings

- Plague
- Rot / Putrefaction
- Pandemic
- Quarantine
- Xenophobia / Racism
- Bigotry / Mob justice
- Maggots & flying insects (including SFX)
- Self-harm
- Human sacrifice
- Immolation

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill presents... *The Magnus Archives*. Episode one hundred and sixty-four: "The Sick Village."

[Theme finishes]

[Tape clicks on]

[Sounds of an English park: barking dog, people chat, ducks, songbirds, and trees rustling in a breeze; a blowfly buzzes nearby]

ARCHIVIST

There is a sickness in this village. Perhaps you would not see it from a distance, and the faint sting of rot on the breeze is easy enough to dismiss. But as you get closer that infectious feeling of wrongness is harder and harder to shake.

The grass is not the green of nature, the buildings are warped by more than age, and the voices that come from behind the inhabitants' masks are hoarse and wet. They move with exaggerated casualness, a parody of idyllic village life. And when they have a break from weeping, they reassure each other how wonderful it is in their village, or at least how wonderful it used to be. Each is covered from head to toe in thick black fabric, and they never, ever touch.

Take a deep breath. The air feels thick and soupy in your lungs, swarming with a thousand contagions digging into you, begging for you to join the village. It's so quiet there, and everyone cares for each other, far from the din and compacted flesh of the city. In the centre, a maypole stands, mildewed strips of coloured cloth hanging limply from it like shreds of ragged skin. The base of the pole is ashen and charred.

[The background park sounds slowly fades further into the background; the sound of buzzing of insects and squirming worms fades in]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

The disease itself is nothing special. It begins as a small patch of discoloured skin, the tiniest blemish. Scrub it off, and it is gone! For a few hours, at least. But it returns again and again, and begins to spread, a mould with tendrils that burrow deep. It ranges in colour from rancid yellow and corpse-fat white to the dull, angry purple of a fresh bruise. It itches, and burns, and you can feel it

growing and spreading inside you, looking for the core of you. At least until it worms its way into your bones. Beneath the coat of each terrified citizen of this sick village lies a lurking possibility, a nightmarish suspicion of infectious constellations of hungry mildew, a mutating technicolour atlas of rotten and pockmarked flesh. But who can know for sure? Their coats are oh, so thick.

There was never a time before the disease, no matter what the old bastards tell you. It has always been in the village, always festered in the dark corners where nobody could stomach to check. Where good neighbours wouldn't dream to speculate. But those who live here will tell you different. From behind their masks those friendly voices will tell you how it used to be: clean, and hygienic, and *always* bathed in sepia sunshine. They *know* in the guts of them this sickness has come from outside, that it is those from beyond the village that have done this to them.

They brought it here, they whisper to each other in the unnamed pub, hunched and bloated over their pale and stinking beers, lifting their masks to take a mouthful, puce faces and frightened sneers exposed for just a moment.

They couldn't leave us well enough alone. They wanted what we have, our perfect peaceful life, and so they dragged their sickness here and damned us all. The patrons speak quietly, as who can say for certain whether the face behind a mask is a good, honest village face, or a sickness-bearing harbinger from beyond.

And people do still come to the village, for however thick the paranoia, however terrible the disease, there are worse things beyond. They are stopped, of course. Beaten and stripped and checked head to toe for signs of infection. The village council sees to that. Most are uncontaminated, though that does little to save them, while others are already laced right through with

fungus of their own. A few are spared brutality, and treated with such cordial politeness you must have thought their inquisitors old friends. Though there seems on the surface no rhyme to such decisions, were you to look beneath the coats, you might see the patterns of their mould were matched.

It is, alas, those who are unblemished that suffer worst. So incomprehensible is it that any from outside could be clean, that there might be another source or vector, the inspectors devise another theory. An invisible infection, a hundred Typhoid Marys spreading mildew and decay. They keep them in the post office, wrapped in chicken wire, prodded and jeered and watched. Should they begin to show signs of the rot, then maybe, just maybe, they can stay for now, though nobody will doubt that it was *they* that brought the illness. But if they stay clean, if they continue to act like they are better, like they are above the sickness that it is certain they must have brought to the village, then that cannot be endured. So they are taken to the village green, and the scorch marks at the base of the maypole get darker.

The villagers stand on the green to watch, ignoring the bending of the grass as it tries to worm its way through their boots. They watch the screaming outsider as the fire purifies them, and inside feel the gnawing panic of their own secrets. For how long ago did they really come to the village? How deep did their roots go? Do any of them truly remember? What if *they* are an outsider? What if they're found out?

No. Such fears are to be quashed and swallowed; they must stand strong; they must stand together as one body against the mass of those beyond the village who would see them degraded and destroyed. They cannot allow such secret terrors to break their unity. And the maypole watches over all.

There is no house in town that has not found itself marked with the red cross of plague, but paint is fleeting and the villagers are *so desperate* to hide their state. Night still falls here, if only to give those that wish it a chance to try and hide their frantic denials. As the weak dawn breaks, you may count the doors now painted white, and see who is more conscientious in covering their spongy skin. The deception is pitiable, and yet deep down every villager knows the mould has marked them *deeper* than any of the others, and carries it as their most secret shame.

Foremost in their denials are the village council, those loud and hardy souls who have taken it upon themselves to police this place, to safeguard their *traditions* and denounce the infection that is the right and proper punishment of those who would allow the village borders to be breached, and their ancient way of life to be compromised. Their masks are blue and red and white, and their coats are the colour of fresh ivory, stained sometimes with streaks of crimson from their dutiful ministrations. None would dare accuse them of infection, and to cross them or draw their eye is to invite the strongest diagnosis.

Head of the council is Jillian Smith. Her father's father's father's father built the maypole, carved from a jackalberry tree and painted in the colours of the village. This place is her home and her right and her duty, and woe to any fungus-riddled outsider who might believe it otherwise. For no one would speak up if Jillian Smith were to mark you infected or declare you foreign. No one would lift a finger as they dragged you to the green. Her gloves are purest white and never sullied, and they hide a cerulean mould that covers every inch of her, through skin, muscle, and organ, though she has no idea it runs so deep.

By night, she sits in the quiet darkness of her perfect cottage, peeling herself with a straight razor, layer by layer, desperate to reach the pure flesh she is so sure must still be in there, somewhere. Her living room is the same suffocation blue as the rest of her, every surface piled high with her own discarded bloody skin, and she has no terror deeper than the thought she might be discovered. As she pulls spongy strips free one agonizing fibre at a time, she stares from her window at the house of her neighbour, Mrs Kim. Mrs Kim is not on the village council. Mrs Kim keeps to herself. And Jillian Smith is certain that Mrs Kim is not infected, and *hates* her for it.

What Mrs Kim is, is scared. Scared of her neighbours, scared of her friends, scared of the moment when someone will smell the spreading patch of darkness on her back, and decide she is infected, or remember she has only been in the village since her grandfather's day, and judge her to be an outsider. Should she accuse someone else? Send them to the village green? Perhaps she might petition to join the council, though that would invite their attention as much as anything might. Even through the masks, Mrs Kim knows the looks she gets in the pub. But what can she do? When she hears the shouts outside and sees the smoke pouring from the thatch roof, she knows it is too late.

They drag her to the maypole, their masks hiding the tears of terror and angry shame, and lash her there with those strips of cloth that never seem to burn. Mrs Kim does not fight, though she screams and screams and screams as all her fears are realized. Jillian Smith tries to smile as she watches her neighbour burn, but the fungus is too thick around her lips, and her face no longer moves.

As the flames consume the last of Mrs Kim in thick and acrid smoke, the mould reaches the bones of Jillian Smith, and she *blooms*. In a moment she is swollen, bloated, bursting into a cloud of violet spores that envelop the green and those

who dwell there, embracing them in a rot that long since seeped into the soil of this blighted land.

[The sounds of buzzing insects and squirming slowly fade back; the initial English park sounds are easily heard again]

(The Archivist breaths deeply)

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

(Quietly) Okay. End recording.

[Tape clicks off]

[Tape clicks on]

[Wind swirls; the distant sound of the village]

[Martin and the Archivist stand on a gritty surface]

ARCHIVIST

We're *fine*.

MARTIN

A-Are we? I mean, that place is- (**sputters**) I don't, I don't feel fine, okay, and you were there a *long* time doing your, y-your guidebook, which, you know, I get it, but that place is— I-it's *infectious*, and, I don't—

ARCHIVIST

We're *not* infected, Martin; that place, it... it isn't *for us*.

MARTIN

A, alright but, but how do you *know*?

ARCHIVIST

I just... *Do*. I just know it.

(Beat)

MARTIN

You've been *knowing* a lot, lately.

ARCHIVIST

Yes.

MARTIN

A lot more than you used to.

ARCHIVIST

Ye..Yeah.

And it, and it feels more... deliberate. Like I have more control now.

MARTIN

Okay.

So... How much can you see? What else do you know?

ARCHIVIST

Uhh... (**surprise**) Maybe everything.

MARTIN

What do you mean, 'everything'?

ARCHIVIST

I don't— Ask me a question. O-one I can't, possibly know already.

MARTIN

Okay... What's my middle name?

[Hissing static starts]

ARCHIVIST

Huh.

(Shocked) Y-you don't have one!

MARTIN

(Impressed) Whoa.

ARCHIVIST

You— I actually *believed* you!

[Hissing static ends]

MARTIN

Oh- S-Sorry; sorry, I just, I just wanted to try it out—

ARCHIVIST

'That's ridiculous,' I thought, 'That's not a real name, but he wouldn't *lie* to me.'

MARTIN

O-okay, okay, okay, okay. Let's, let's try something a little bigger, then.

ARCHIVIST

Alright.

MARTIN

Is Basira alive? Is she in... o-one of these places?

[Hissing static starts]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

She's alive. Out there, not trapped in a hellscape, but— moving. Hunting.

She's... she's looking for Daisy. She's a few steps behind.

[Hissing static ends]

MARTIN

And Daisy?

[Hissing static starts]

ARCHIVIST

...Bestial. Brutal. Carving her way through the domains of other Powers,
following the scent of blood—

(The Archivist sighs)

Oh, Daisy, I'm sorry.

[Hissing static ends]

MARTIN

What's Basira going to *do*?

[Hissing static starts]

ARCHIVIST

She— *thinks* she's going to kill Daisy. Like she promised. But she's conflicted.

[Hissing static ends]

MARTIN

And will she?

ARCHIVIST

I-I don't know; th-the future, th-th-that's... that's not something I can see.

MARTIN

Okay, good to know. How much further do we still need to go?

[Hissing static starts]

ARCHIVIST

A long way.

Through many dark and awful places.

MARTIN

Is this— A-are you okay? How are you feeling?

ARCHIVIST

I- Um, I, I'm okay. I-It's a little, strange? But i-it doesn't hurt.

[Hissing static ends]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

Keep going; you have questions, let's hear them.

MARTIN

Oh, oh, okay, um. How are the others?

[Hissing static starts]

ARCHIVIST

I, uh.

Huh. I'm-I'm not sure. I-I can't really see Melanie, or, or, or Georgie.

MARTIN

They're dead?

ARCHIVIST

No, no, I-I don't think so, if they were dead, I-I think I *would* know that, I just—
I don't know... where they are, w-what they're doing.

MARTIN

Hm.

ARCHIVIST

L-London, maybe?

[Hissing static ends]

MARTIN

What about Elias?

[Hissing static starts]

ARCHIVIST

(Darker) He's inside the Panopticon. The tower, far above the world.

MARTIN

(Dryly) That one?

ARCHIVIST

Yes.

MARTIN

(Hateful) How is he?

ARCHIVIST

Hard to say. The, the way this works, this new sight, the knowledge is, is...

(sigh) somehow wrapped up in the Panopticon? Ah... an eye can't see inside itself.

MARTIN

Hmm.

ARCHIVIST

But I can feel him in there.

MARTIN

Hm. That sounds... *gross*.

ARCHIVIST

It is.

(They both laugh)

MARTIN

Are we safe, traveling like this?

ARCHIVIST

Yes.

Yes, sort of, we're... I don't know how to phrase it, we're... something between a pilgrim and a moth. We can walk through these little worlds of terror, watching them. Separate, and untouched.

MARTIN

That's *not* as comforting (**slight chuckle**) as you might think.

ARCHIVIST

I like it better than the alternative.

[Hissing static ends]

MARTIN

Fair point! (**small laugh**) Okay, okay, uh, what else, what else, um... Oh! Um, uh, who was— uh, uh, phone! Um, w-who was calling me?

[Hissing static starts]

ARCHIVIST

...I *think* it was Annabelle Cane.

MARTIN

Hm.

ARCHIVIST

That's- weird; I-I know the Web was wrapped around that phone, but, but I can't... see her. A-at all. At least with Georgie and Melanie I have a vague sense they're still alive, i-in London, and o— well, what *was* London. But Annabelle? Nothing.

[Hissing static ends]

MARTIN

Hm. W-well, I'll... I'll ask her, next time she calls.

ARCHIVIST

(Amused) Well, I know that's a bad idea.

MARTIN

(Amused) What, do you?

ARCHIVIST

...Okay, no, that one was a very reasonable guess.

MARTIN

Ha!

ARCHIVIST

Anything else? I'll-I'll be honest, I'm starting to feel a bit... self-conscious being a post-apocalyptic Google?

MARTIN

Okay, okay, just one more, but— it's a big one.

ARCHIVIST

Okay.

MARTIN

Can we turn the world back?

[Hissing static starts]

ARCHIVIST

*Whoa. Um. I-if the fears are removed, yes, but th-they can't be destroyed while there are still people to fear them, th-then they can't be banished back to the space where they came from, it-it's not *there* anymore, I-I- ***Oh, uh...****

MARTIN

J-J-J-John, what's wrong?!

ARCHIVIST

Uh, it's, uh, I'm sorry, trying to know things about them directly, i-i-it's like—
(exhale) God, it's like looking into the Sun.

MARTIN

Okay, okay, okay. Alright, that's alright. We can leave it.

[Hissing static ends]

(Archivist breaths heavily)

ARCHIVIST

Good. *Ow.*

MARTIN

Hey. (**small chuckle**) Hey, it's okay, it's okay. We'll go slow for a while.

ARCHIVIST

Alright.

MARTIN

Yeah. Yeah, there's no rush.

Oh, actually, what about Helen, where's *she* these days?

[Hissing static starts]

ARCHIVIST

Uh, She's... (**dry laugh**)

Right. Naturally.

MARTIN

What. What's she doing?

ARCHIVIST

Martin, turn around.

[Martin turns]

MARTIN

Oh, you're *kidding*.

ARCHIVIST

Wish I was!

MARTIN

(**Sigh**) Shall we... um...

[They walk]

ARCHIVIST

Do you want to do the honours?

MARTIN

Not *really*!

[The Archivist knocks on a door]

(Beat)

MARTIN

Maybe, no one's home?

[The door opens; it sounds the same as Helen's door in the
Institute]

HELEN

Hello, John!

[Helen's walks out of her corridor to join Martin and the
Archivist outdoors, her footsteps turning from echoing to gritty; the
door closes]

[Hissing static, with a high-pitched tone, starts]

ARCHIVIST

(Sighing) How did you find us?

HELEN

Oh! I thought you'd know everything by this point.

ARCHIVIST

Yes, I suppose I do.

(Helen laughs)

Hmm.

MARTIN

And I don't! So, care to enlighten me?

ARCHIVIST

Oh, yes, sorry, uh, The Distortion can always find anyone who has... crossed its threshold.

HELEN

And that includes *you*, Martin! Remember? And please — my name is Helen.

ARCHIVIST

Like you said, I can know everything now, including how much of a lie that really is.

HELEN

Don't mistake complication for falsehood, dear Archivist. And remember, that knowledge is not the same thing as understanding!

ARCHIVIST

What do you want.

HELEN

To say hello! And check up on the happy couple.

(She laughs)

I always knew you crazy kids would make it work.

(The Archivist sighs)

MARTIN

Thanks.

ARCHIVIST

Martin. Look, I've no interest in your... gloating.

HELEN

(Innocently) What would I have to gloat about? Much as I am *delighted* by this brave new world in which we find ourselves, I can take no credit for it. This was *all...* you!

ARCHIVIST

You could have— You knew what was happening.

HELEN

I suspected. But all I really did was refuse to help! And that is hardly a unique quality.

(The Archivist sighs)

If that makes it *my* fault, then surely this is Georgie's fault as well, and Melanie's—

ARCHIVIST

Leave them out of this, they didn't know!

HELEN

There it is again! Knowledge! It's so very important to you, isn't it? These fossilized nuggets of pretend comprehension, weighing you down, stopping you thinking or feeling! What about hypotheticals? If they had known, what would they have done? Is that something you can see?

ARCHIVIST

What. Do. You. Want!

HELEN

To be friends again! All three of us.

(The Archivist sighs)

HELEN (CONT'D)

Look at this place, look at this— (**inhales deeply**) Wonderland. This is the world, now, and we are strong and free! There's really no reason for us not to hang out.

Goodness, he *is* in a mood. Has he been like this the whole time?

MARTIN

Not the... whole time.

HELEN

Thank goodness.

ARCHIVIST

Martin...

MARTIN

In fairness, he's had a lot on.

HELEN

(Sympathetic) Oh, I'm sure.

ARCHIVIST

Martin... *please*.

MARTIN

Sorry, it's just— maybe she can help.

ARCHIVIST

With *what*.

MARTIN

With our, with our, with our quest!

(The Archivist makes a displeased sound)

We've been walking a while, and well, her *door's*... maybe we could, you know — shortcut!

ARCHIVIST

No. No, I don't think that's a good idea.

HELEN

I would happily take him. But I don't think he'd want to leave you.

MARTIN

Okay, o-one, hm, don't talk about me like I'm not here; it's, rude. Two, I *know* you can take two people at once. Me and Tim were both inside the corridors when it—

ARCHIVIST

Martin, it's not that si-simple.

HELEN

I'm afraid the Archivist is *too* powerful now.

(The Archivist makes an annoyed sound)

If he tried to travel through my corridors, it would *not* go well, for any of us.

ARCHIVIST

But mainly for you.

HELEN

(False pleasant) *Ooo!* Is that a threat?

ARCHIVIST

No.

HELEN

Mm, pity!

MARTIN

So, no shortcuts then. **(sigh)** Understood. I'm not leaving you on your own.

HELEN

Oh! Such devotion. You really don't deserve it. But of course, you know that already!

(Helen laughs)

Oh, this is nice! I am really glad we get to spend some proper, *quality* time together now.

MARTIN

(Unsure) ...Yeah.

HELEN

Anyway. Sorry to love you and leave you, but I must dash. It's a very busy time for me, lots of things to *do*, people to— well. You know!

ARCHIVIST

I don't doubt it.

(Beat)

MARTIN

...What?

HELEN

Just taking a moment to look. You two are just *such* an adorable couple—

ARCHIVIST

Enough!

[Helen opens her door]

HELEN

See you soon!

[She walks into her corridors, the door shutting behind her]

(The Archivist sighs)

MARTIN

(Upbeat) Maybe she's right!

[Static and high-pitched tone stops]

ARCHIVIST

I am *not*, nor have I ever *been*, "adorable."

MARTIN

Okay, *not* true. But I actually meant the whole... being friends thing? I mean, I don't see why—

ARCHIVIST

Martin, she's... a cruel, vicious monster!

MARTIN

Yes. Yes, she is. But who else is there?

(The Archivist sighs)

[Tape clicks off]

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Outro]

JONATHAN SIMS

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