

MAG 188 — Centre of Attention

Content Warnings

- Scopophobia
- Loss of privacy
- Judgment & shaming
- Shadenfreude
- Bystander apathy
- Therapeutic malpractice
- Body horror (including SFX)
- Eye trauma
- Mentions of: Grief/loss (discussion), gaslighting, loss of identity, insomnia, asthma attacks

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill presents... *The Magnus Archives*. Episode one hundred and eighty-eight: "Centre of Attention."

[Theme finishes]

[Tape clicks on]

[Martin and the Archivist walk on pavement]

[Suburban sounds: automated sprinklers, distant dog barks, the far-off sound of urban traffic; these sounds repeat as they travel]

MARTIN

How much longer? Feels like we've been walking through suburbs forever.

ARCHIVIST

Well, quite.

MARTIN

Ah. Right. Okay. Literal suburban hellscape, then?

ARCHIVIST

Yes. Endless, cookie-cutter housing. Impersonal, alienating. A common expression of The Lonely even before the world went to hell.

MARTIN

I guess.

Seems a bit, I don't know... a bit tame compared to some of the other stuff, though.

ARCHIVIST

I mean, not to be, uh... That isn't exactly a surprise, is it? That The Lonely seems comfortable to you?

MARTIN

Guess not.

ARCHIVIST

But if you think there's a lack of violence or suffering, then I'm afraid you're mistaken. There's plenty, it's just... hidden. Trapped behind identical doors and down silent streets of unknown neighbours. The suffering here is deep. And it's private.

MARTIN

O-Okay, yeah, I get it. So, I guess we're looking for an empty house? Somewhere to... 'unburden yourself'?

ARCHIVIST

Actually no. Helen— Th-The Distortion, turns out that was... a lot of fear for the Eye. And, uh...

MARTIN

You're still full?

ARCHIVIST

I suppose that's one way to put it.

(Beat)

MARTIN

You still haven't really explained what happened there.

ARCHIVIST

She tried to trap me in the corridors, so I destroyed her.

MARTIN

Yeah, I, I know, but, I mean... why?

ARCHIVIST

Probably because I told her I was going to kill her.

MARTIN

Yeah, that'd do it. Was it that bad in there?

ARCHIVIST

There were a lot of people suffering.

MARTIN

But that's not why you did it.

ARCHIVIST

She was... She was too dangerous. She was only ever playing us.

MARTIN

So all that talk of wanting to be friends, she was just, what, lying?

ARCHIVIST

No... That was real. She did want to be friends. But she also wanted us suspicious, off-balance, uncomfortable. She *wanted* to be able to hurt us.

MARTIN

I mean... bit of a contradiction, surely?

ARCHIVIST

Is it? She wanted to be our friend, she just didn't want to be a good friend.

MARTIN

Huh. She couldn't help what she was, I guess.

ARCHIVIST

She didn't even try.

MARTIN

I hope the others don't take it too hard. Melanie was pretty close to her at one point. Assuming Melanie's still alive, of course.

ARCHIVIST

Yeah. I thought you and Helen got on well, though?

MARTIN

Yeah, I... I-I dunno, really. She always seemed to know just the right thing to say, or the wrong thing, kind of. Like, sh-she had a way of getting into your head and making you feel like you didn't know what the deal was. Like, like you were being stupid or something.

ARCHIVIST

Sounds about right.

MARTIN

Plus, I... I was a little bit jealous as well.

ARCHIVIST

Of what?

MARTIN

Of Helen. Well, the real Helen. I found the tape when you were on the run and... I don't know. Something about the way you two seemed to *connect* when she came in.

ARCHIVIST

Before she was eaten by a door.

MARTIN

Well, Yeah. It certainly seemed to have a pretty deep impact on you.

ARCHIVIST

It did. I think... I mean, you remember how I was back then, how paranoid. The Not!Sasha was there, and I could sense something wasn't right, but I just couldn't place it. Left me a suspicious wreck. Then when Helen Richardson came in, it seemed like... she was in the same place I was, but worse, further along. I thought, maybe if I could help her, that would mean... maybe I wasn't beyond help?

(Beat)

MARTIN

I'm sorry for how it worked out.

ARCHIVIST

Me too.

MARTIN

Was there any of the original Helen left in there?

(The Archivist exhales with uncertainty)

ARCHIVIST

I... If there was I could never see it properly. I know that Helen Richardson was gone. The same way Michael Shelley was gone. I know The Distortion was neither of them. I also know that The Distortion of Helen was not the same being as The Distortion of Michael. But they were all so twisted up as a direct part of The Spiral. It...It's like, I could follow the knowledge of any one line of identity, but as soon as I tried to take a step back and see the whole, the picture... changed.

I want to believe that thing was just wearing Helen Richardson like a mask. That I finally avenged her.

(Beat)

MARTIN

...A-At least we'll have plenty to tell the others when we meet up.

ARCHIVIST

Yeah. Yeah we will.

MARTIN

Speaking of. How's Basira doing? Where is she, at the moment?

[Hissing static starts]

ARCHIVIST

She's trying to catch her breath in a labyrinth of masks. She hates The Stranger, but has overcome it before, and will do so again. Her path is slow and painful, but she hasn't fallen yet.

[Hissing static ends]

MARTIN

Thanks. I'm, I'm trying not to worry about her.

ARCHIVIST

I know.

(Beat)

[Footsteps continue]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

Oh. Hold on.

MARTIN

What?

[They stop walking]

ARCHIVIST

We're about to enter London proper. We should take a moment.

MARTIN

What's it like?

ARCHIVIST

It's the seat of The Eye. The other powers have small enclaves within in, but...
it's going to be a lot.

MARTIN

Okay. A lot of what?

[They take a step forward and there is the crackling static of
domain transition]

[Sounds of suburbia is replaced with the whirr of irises focussing,
security cameras whirring and the buzz of drones flying past]

MARTIN (CONT'D)

Oookay. That's a lot of, um... Are they real?

ARCHIVIST

They're not people. But they *can* see us.

MARTIN

D-Do they ever leave the windows, or...

ARCHIVIST

No. They don't need to. They have a very good view.

MARTIN

And the cameras?

ARCHIVIST

I wouldn't look at them too closely.

MARTIN

I won't if they return the favour.

Okay. S-So. D-Do we just... start walking again?

ARCHIVIST

I don't see why not.

[There is a crunch of glass debris as they start walking]

MARTIN

At least there aren't any cars.

[Spotlights flare into life with a heavy ka-chonk sound]

(Martin makes a sound of unease)

ARCHIVIST

I suppose they don't get many new faces around here.

MARTIN

Especially not The Archivist. Don't forget, you're a celebrity.

ARCHIVIST

Maybe. Or maybe it's Elias' personal welcome wagon.

[Several drones come closer in, tracking Martin and the Archivist]

MARTIN

Oh. Hmm. Is that a possibility?

ARCHIVIST

I don't know. I still can't see him.

MARTIN

...Then I guess we'll find out.

ARCHIVIST

Let's move on. I don't need to attract any *more* attention.

MARTIN

Er, yeah.

ARCHIVIST

Besides, turns out I *can* feel a statement coming on, and I'd rather not do it with any more of an audience than absolutely necessary.

[Tape clicks off]

[Tape clicks on]

[Whispers echo indistinguishably, some camera iris movements]

[The Archivist's voice sounds more resonant, as if in an empty room, then adopts usual statement tone]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

Alright. Hm. You want a show so badly?

Fine.

[Hissing static starts]

[City sounds; helicopters, city trains, crowds; with camera iris movements]

[Hissing static ends]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

London. Carmen hated London. She had only ever moved here because there were no jobs in her field outside of it, though right now she couldn't have told you for certain what her field actually was. When she had first arrived she had almost convinced herself she liked it, but that had worn thin very quickly, and recently the place had changed. It felt... different.

It had always watched her; Carmen had never been under any illusion about that. Most surveilled city in the world, so much so that you didn't even notice most of the time. She would barely register the bank of CCTV monitors on the side of the bus that cycled through angles until you were staring at the side of your own head. And she had lived next to a small park for two years before she realised the huge metal pole in the middle of the pathways wasn't a streetlamp, but a bank of cameras.

She had once counted how many times she could spot a camera watching her during her morning run: thirty-one in ten minutes. At least, it had been back then. Last time she had tried it there were hundreds. They tracked her movements, and made so much noise that she could not have ignored them if

she had tried. It was halfway between the mechanical whir of a focusing lens and the low rattle of mean-spirited laughter. Carmen didn't go running anymore.

[The city sounds transition to become muffled]

[A bed creaks in sympathy with Carmen's movements]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

She lay in bed now, the lights of the streetlamps below her window washing out the world in a faintly green LED glow. Her curtains had long since torn, and there was nowhere to buy any more. When she turned onto her side, she could see the blinds of the flat across the street twitching, the suggestion of an observer between the slats. Carmen turned her back to the window, tried to ignore the sense that she was being watched, being judged. Her own eyes drifted to the door to her room, and she realised it was ajar.

[The creak of a door and someone moving throughout]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

In the gap stood her flatmate, the one whose name Carmen didn't remember, and who she couldn't recall moving in. Straight blonde hair atop a round, friendly face that never seemed to blink.

'It's late,' the flatmate said, her tone level. Carmen's throat tightened. 'I am trying to sleep. This is not acceptable.'

The words bit into Carmen and she felt her head swim and her heart race so fast she thought it was going to burst. What time was it? She hadn't been making any noise, how had her flatmate known? This was her room, her space, she was allowed to be awake, she was—

Her flatmate was still there, standing in the doorway, eyes locked on her. Carmen was shaking all over, trying to keep her teeth from chattering, from making more noise that might further disturb this presence in her room.

[Whispers begin]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

She did not sleep. And her flatmate did not move. And as the night passed, she could have sworn she heard the faintest snicker drifting from nearby windows.

**[Transitions to a cabinet opening, and a bathroom tap running,
followed by brief teeth brushing]**

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

The sun came up gradually, bathing everything in the harshest of lights, every pavement crack revealed, every broken window or poorly painted façade laid bare for all to see. Carmen stared at her face in the mirror, the glow of morning reflecting back the bruised and puffy bags under her eyelids, the wrinkles that seemed to deepen every day... how many days now... and the pale weariness that almost leaked from her skin. She tried to force a smile, but her reflection just stared at her, well aware that it was false.

[Footsteps]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

Behind her, she saw the face of her flatmate, that same expression that dropped a hot coal of anxiety into her stomach.

'I am waiting for the bathroom,' the flatmate said. 'This is not acceptable.'

Bile rose from Carmen's throat for just a second as the flatmate took a step closer, watching her every move, examining her for imperfections, for failures. And there were so many.

[Bare feet on wood as Carmen runs into her room, slamming the door; she starts searching her wardrobe]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

Carmen pushed past her, out of the bathroom, and ran back to her room, where she tried to find clothes for the day, but everything in her wardrobe was fit only to draw attention to her. She so desperately wanted to simply disappear, just for a moment.

[Transitions to a door being shut and locked; fluorescent light hums; a camera iris movement]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

A camera swivelled to focus on her the moment she left her flat, stepping onto the landing, lens extending towards her, right at eye level. She instinctively swatted at it, batting it away.

[Wet crunching impact]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

It was softer than she expected, and warmer, impacting the wall with a gentle pop, and leaving a sticky grey residue behind it. Carmen hurried down the stairs as the other cameras all focused on her, and the other doors on the floor began to open to see what all the fuss was about.

[Hurried footsteps on concrete; cameras iris, doors creak open]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

From the speed at which they opened, her neighbours must have been standing just behind them. Waiting.

She took it two steps at a time going down, and almost tripped and fell twice, but it was better than the lift. The lift was nothing but cameras and mirrors, infinite reflections staring at each other out to all eternity and the endless multiplication of four cameras to watch it all forever. No, she wasn't going in the lift.

**[Transitions to exterior door opening to urban London sounds
including people talking]**

[Footsteps as she walks]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

At last she was in the street, the air of the city close, dry and tinged with that gritty texture that always made her afraid she was going to have an asthma attack. Did she have one recently? There were memories, flashes of lying on the ground, desperate for someone, anyone, to help. But they had just watched silently. Some had taken videos. But she was here now, and she couldn't afford to have another attack today. She had somewhere very important to be.

The street outside was not crowded, which gave Carmen the briefest moment of hope. Perhaps she could make her journey in relative peace.

**[A camera iris, followed by two synchronised footsteps as
people turn; crowd talking stops, whispers start]**

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

But then the camera orb on a nearby pole swivelled to focus on her and, just like that, every single person turned towards her as one. Her stomach dropped as one by one their faces lit up, taking on that unmistakable hue of anticipation; of recognition. Carmen could remember none of these people, but there was no ignoring the fact that they definitely knew her and, more than that, she was *important* to them.

'Oh my god,' a young man said as she tried to walk past him, 'it's you!'

[Carmen's walking stops]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

He waited for a response, but Carmen had nothing to say, and as her feet locked in place her mind could do nothing but recite at her a litany of her inadequacies, her failures, her regrets. What did he want from her? His smile turned into a sneer.

'I should have known,' he spat, 'what a disappointment.'

[Carmen's walking restarts]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

Carmen tried to walk faster, ignoring the middle-aged woman who looked her up and down, not bothering to hide the judgement in her gaze. All she had to say was, 'Oh.'

A little girl implored for Carmen to play with her, huge eyes pleading, but she didn't have time.

‘You’re just like everyone said you were!’ the little girl screamed as Carmen tried to walk away. ‘No wonder Simone left you.’

Shut up, shut up, shut up, there’s no way the child could have known that. Did someone see? Of course they did, of course they were always watching, judging, knowing all her business and there was nothing she could do to stop it. To keep them from being disappointed, to not hurt them. She just screwed up, and they all just watched her fall.

[Transitions to a pen click followed by sporadic writing; in the background a fish tank bubbles]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

‘Sounds like you have the weight of the world on your shoulders,’ her therapist said, voice soft and mellifluous. The deep brown of her eyes met Carmen’s, and as always Carmen had to quiet the flutter of her heart, choke down and try her best to hide the seed of lust that had settled inside her long ago. But she was certain she saw a flash of contempt pass across her therapist’s face. She knew, she had seen.

‘It does feel like that,’ Carmen said. ‘There’s so much pressure, and I don’t know why.’

‘I know why’, the therapist said. ‘It’s because everyone’s counting on you. Everyone’s watching.’

[Transitions to door slamming followed by furniture movements as Carmen rearranges the room; the muffled sound of London in the background]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

Carmen was back in her room at last. She had no curtains, so pressed her mattress against the glass to keep out the light. To keep out the curiosity. Her door did not lock, so she pushed her unused desk against the flimsy MDF. To keep out her flatmate. At last she was alone. Nobody could see her. She could do what she liked and it would harm nobody.

So why didn't she feel it? Why was there still that small, panicked buzzing in the back of her mind that told her something could see her. That she was not alone. Carmen managed not to scream, but couldn't stop herself kicking the wall in frustration.

[A series of kicks against a wall, followed by plaster falling]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

The rage passed in a moment and shame hit her like a truck. Someone had seen that, she was sure of it, and what must they think of her?

[Large plaster falling sound, followed by an unpleasant, watery, pulsing sound]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

On the section of wall she had kicked, a big chunk of plaster crumbled to the floor, revealing the brick behind. Carmen's brow wrinkled, first in confusion, then in horror. Set into those bricks behind the plaster was an eye. It was larger than a human eye, and flatter, almost the size of her head, and it pulsed gently.

The pupil was locked on her. And all at once Carmen understood how deep it went, that they were in everything, lurking in the very fabric of the world she lived in, always keeping watch on her.

[Furniture movement, followed by walking to kitchen, then knife sliding]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

It was not in rage, but in cold fury that Carmen moved the desk and marched down to the kitchen, ignoring her flatmate's recriminations of her actions being unacceptable. She picked up a chef's knife and returned to her room, shutting the door behind her once again.

[Door slams; pulsing sound resumes]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

She looked at the eye, and the eye looked back.

Carmen's arm shot out, thrusting the tip of the blade right into the pupil. But it did not cut anything, for there was nothing but empty blackness. Carmen's knife, then her hand, then her forearm passed into the void of that pupil, her skin bristling with the cold.

[Ice crunching; followed by a loud wet contraction]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

And then the iris closed around her arm, the thin flesh of the tightening muscle clenching with astonishing strength as it held her in place.

[Wet crunching after muscular constriction; Carmen starts to groan and cry as she struggles]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

Then, inch by inch by inch, it began to pull her in. She tried to scream, but her flatmate simply shushed her. Her terror was pointed and crimson, and tomorrow she will wake up hating London, and worrying about how many cameras there are.

[Hissing static starts]

[One last grunt and watery struggling]

(The Archivist breathes deeply)

[Hissing static ends]

[Whispers and camera iris movements resume]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

Is that what you wanted to hear? Why you're all staring at me like that? You wanted a story? Or maybe I am your chosen one and you're just waiting for your orders. I'm special to the thing upstairs, so that makes me special to all of you as well, right?

Well, let's see if I'm worthy of your attention.

[A camera whirs]

[Tape clicks off]

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Outro]

JONATHAN SIMS

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