

MAG – 074 – Fatigue

Content warnings:

- Insomnia
- Temporal distortion
- Altered reality
- Body horror
- Paranormal encounter

Discussions of: sadism

Mentions of: blood, drugs, death

SFX: low drone, high pitched tone

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill presents: The Magnus Archives. Episode seventy-four. Fatigue.

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro – Continues]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Lydia Halligan regarding her insomnia. Original statement given 8th June 2015. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

I don't know when I last slept. It's not that I can't remember, it's just that I can't really tell. When I manage to steal an hour or so, if that's even happened,

my dreams seem so vivid and my waking so disjointed, that they blur together. Like all I have are scenes and images, devoid of context, and no true way to tell what is real and what is not.

I'm lying in my bed. It's hot. I know the central heating is off but the air still has that dry warmth that scratches your throat. I want to get up, to move, but my body is too tired, all the strength in it gone. I just lie there, watching the ceiling fan spin round and around and around, a dull whirring that grinds against my brain. It is dark outside, and the only light is the glow from my small bedside lamp. As I watch it, my eyes adjusting to the motion, the fan slows. It loses its momentum gradually, until at last it is completely still and there is silence. I wait, and it begins to turn again in the other direction. Now spinning anticlockwise, it accelerates until the blades are once again a blur. I do not remember my flat having a ceiling fan when I moved in.

I've always had problems sleeping. Even as a child, my mother would always check my room to find me reading well into the night. If I heard her coming up the stairs, I would turn off my light and dive beneath the covers to try and convince her I was sound asleep. If it worked, I would listen to her walk off to her room, and then bring out my book once again. At the time I thought it was because I loved reading, but looking back I think it must have been the first stirrings of insomnia.

There is a billboard outside my flat. It overlooks a small roundabout and used to have adverts for whatever the latest TV drama was. The metal that holds it up is old and rusted, and sometimes I think I can hear it groaning ever so quietly as I walk past. Now it has an advert for coffee. I assume that is what it's advertising. It's a woman, bright and cheerful, with a sky-blue blouse and shining white smile.

She holds a cup of coffee, the steam rising and curling in front of her eyes. There is no brand name or information, just the words, “Sleep is overrated” in a tall, thin font. I don’t know how long it has been there. Her eyes seem to look in through my window.

I work as a freelance writer. It’s not a good job. Very little of it actually involves writing, the rest is chasing up invoices, desperately firing off pitches and worrying over a budget spreadsheet that doesn’t add up. I always thought it suited my schedule, allowing me to be flexible, but it has in many ways just robbed me of any connection to the way the rest of the world organises itself. I never know what day of the week it is. When I don’t sleep the days and nights just bleed together. Sometimes it feels that even my clock is lying to me, telling me that an hour lasts so much longer than it should, then stealing an entire morning in the blink of an eye.

There is a man in my living room. He is tall, with sandy blond hair that twists into unruly curls. I must have invited him in. He sits in my armchair, drumming his fingers together. They make an odd, clacking sound when they touch. I know him, though I have no idea where we might have met. His smile is friendly but I don’t like it. I apologise, tell him I’ve forgotten his name and he waves it away, saying that names are overrated, then asks how my day has been. I tell him I don’t know which day he means, and he laughs and laughs and laughs until my nose begins to bleed. I see the blood dripping onto the patterns I have been drawing. How long have I been drawing? It isn’t my pen.

What’s the longest you’ve ever stayed awake? As a student I liked to push myself, conduct little experiments on my own capacity for fatigue, time how many hours and then try to beat my record.

After a while I stopped counting, though for some reason I never really stopped thinking of them as experiments. At first I tried to convince friends to stay up with me. Sometimes they would but they never lasted more than forty hours, and I always felt too awkward to stay up after they had crashed.

Eventually I began just doing it alone, relishing the feeling that I had somehow seen beyond what they were able to.

I'm sitting in a cafe. It's open all night and I go there when I'm feeling restless late at night. I try to imagine I'm sitting in Hopper's "Nighthawks at the Diner", but there is a thin layer of grease on the plastic tables that dispels any romanticism about the place. I'm drinking a cup of coffee. The coffee is awful, the cheapest instant that money can buy wholesale. I don't care. It is black and opaque and when I drink it, I can feel the tiniest bit of life seep through me as the caffeine enters my blood. I take a long sip and stop. The coffee has something in it. Smooth and hard. I spit it onto the table. It's a tooth. I check, but I am not missing any. It's small, like a child's milk tooth, and it just sits there. The waitress comes over to see if I want food, even though I never do. Her name tag reads "Vanessa". I point to the shiny white lump now lying on the table. I don't think she sees it, and if she does, she does not react.

She goes to get me more coffee.

Your vision goes strange when you don't sleep for a long time. I think it's something to do with changing pressure on your eyeballs. You start to detect faint movements on the edges, on the periphery, and if you stare too long at a flat surface it starts to gently pulse and move. I wrote a short story once where it was things trying to push through into our dimension, strange ghostly creatures that could only be seen by those who had so deprived themselves of

rest that their mind opened itself. In the end the protagonist finally saw them fully, and they blinded her. But maybe it's just the mind becoming too tired to properly process the signals your eyes send. So much of what we see and hear are just useful lies that our brain tells us, filtering out the useless bits and adding in what it expects to see. No-one ever knows what they're really seeing or hearing.

The billboard is damp. A sudden rainstorm has soaked it through and the paper peels away at the corner. The sky-blue blouse is now mottled and mouldy; the smile has warped into a sneer. The coffee is still steaming, the swirls of the steam unaffected by the rain, though the brightness in her eyes has turned into a vicious glare. I can see the rust in the metal supports more clearly now, and they seem to bend ever so slightly when they groan. The text now reads: "Sleep is for the weak".

When you don't sleep, your energy goes in cycles. Your body will go through phases where it seems to be trying to completely shut itself down, and keeping your eyes open is quite literally a physical struggle.

Then all at once you'll enter a period of manic energy, a second, third or fourth wind that leaves you giddy and nauseous, struggling to find an outlet for your sudden rush. Sometimes there is a euphoria with this; other times it's more like desperation. As you get further and further into it, these cycles get closer and closer together, until your entire self seems to change hour by hour. Of course, when you have insomnia, it doesn't matter how much your body tries to send you to sleep in the lulls, it simply doesn't have the ability to do so. Like your whole self is trying to push you into bed, but it is covered by a solid granite block.

The man is back. This time I am on a bench in the park. The clouds roll and curl gently in the pale sky of dawn. He is twisting long blades of grass into strange spirals, but his fingers keep cutting through them instead. Is this when we met? He looks at me, his face impassive... if I even see a face. He tells me that I look terrible. I try to focus, but his body shifts and undulates like so much else when I try to focus. I tell him I haven't slept, and he nods and tells me that's ok. He is lying, and it makes me very afraid.

They say that sleep is the most important factor in long-term health. Night workers are apparently at risk for all sorts of problems but not nearly so much as shift workers who are never able to settle into a proper long-term sleep schedule. The body needs time to rest and repair itself. Caffeine and drugs and adrenaline can give you all the energy you need, but they can't give you the rest that keeps you healthy.

I don't like to think about what this might be doing to my insides, what it might lead to in the future, but it doesn't really matter. Time is not exactly as firm a concept to me now as it perhaps once was. My head is too heavy to give much thought to a clock.

I am running through the city. The alleyways are narrow and winding and do not turn all the directions that they should. The smell chokes me and my body is heavy as stone. I lean against a wall and, for a second, I am unsure if I will ever be able to stand myself up again. I stagger through another street then I stop. I lie down on the tarmac and it is warm and soft under me. I feel sleep begin to overtake me, but I am wrong. It is dawn, and all that comes over me is faint and sickly sunlight. I can hear his laugh again, and my mouth tastes like burnt coffee.

I do not know why I am here. I know this place and what you want, but I have no proof to give you. I have nothing that cannot be waved away as a bad dream. By you, at least. I cannot wave, for my arms are too heavy and my hands are busy drawing those strange, familiar curves. What do you want? To find a child's tooth and hold it up triumphant, a talisman to conjure those things that you should fear.

To photograph and analyse a billboard that has never once advertised coffee. To talk to a person who is not a person and whose strange laugh you should be fleeing? I am here, and I give you my words.

They are all I have, and all you want, and perhaps when I am free of them then I will be allowed to sleep.

I am standing before the billboard. It is night, though a nasty ray of daylight makes it glow a dying pink.

The roundabout is empty and will never see a car again. It just goes around and around and around with no way on and no end to be had. The woman is baring her teeth in a triumphant snarl, her blouse now stained with the same rust that laces through the bars that support her. Her eyes slough off her face, revealing the twisted shapes of whatever the poster is that sits behind her. The steam that rises from the coffee is the same. Always the same, always undisturbed, curling in on itself. The words that stand stark above it: "Sleep no more". I walk toward the billboard, and my sobs are drowned out by the screaming of rusted struts as they bend. The scream of the metal, buckling under the fatigue, the scream of the woman as she bears down upon me. It collapses on top of me, and I collapse with it.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

Erm... a difficult statement. I am forced to agree with Ms. Halligan regarding how verifiable what she says is. There's no way to confirm it isn't a series of bad dreams. It sounds like a series of bad dreams.

A cry for help from a woman with a very severe problem. There are no details to follow up, save for Ms. Halligan herself, who passed away from a heart attack less than a month after giving this statement.

She was 29.

This time last year I would have dismissed her as a kook, wasting our time. But a year changes a lot, and I now recognise the description of a tall man with curly blond hair and a unnerving laugh all too well.

Michael, did you drive her to this? Another victim of your warped games? Or were you simply drawn like a vulture? Or maybe a shark sensing blood. What do you want from your victims?

I'm rather glad I don't really drink coffee.

End recording.

[Tape clicks off. Tape clicks on.]

Supplemental.

I know who's living in the tunnels. Well, that's not exactly true. I don't know their identity, but I've seen them. Shortly after Basira came to see me, I decided not to request her help with the tunnels. It has become clear she has her own concerns to be dealing with, and I am becoming less and less convinced that further police involvement won't result in more issues down

the road. So, shortly after she left, I decided to get somewhat more proactive and purchased a small motion-sensor camera, which I hid in view of the trapdoor. After a week, I reviewed the footage.

It is remarkably poor quality, far below what the specifications of the setup should yield. It may be I was unfair to Elias about his difficulties setting up CCTV in the Archives. Nonetheless, I was able to make out enough. For a start, I saw Sasha, on two separate occasions, entering and leaving the tunnels.

I assume she must have gotten a copy of the key from somewhere, but it seems that when I met her down there earlier she probably wasn't simply following me out of concern. It's not enough to confront her with yet; if she's working against us I don't want to tip my hand too early, but I'll keep a closer eye on her. There's definitely something she's hiding. It may even be she knows the other individual I saw emerging from the trapdoor.

As I said, I do not recognise them. They appear to be a man, or at least male-presenting. Middle-aged or older judging from the frame, but hard to be sure. They emerge around three in the morning, holding what appears to be an attaché case. Then, they spend about half an hour rifling through archives, and retreat back down after stuffing a handful of files into the case. On the one hand, this does reassure me that whatever's down there is human, but what worries me is the manner they leave the trapdoor. Rather than picking the lock or forcing their way through, they seem to move the floor itself out of their way somehow, and replace it when they return. I've triple checked, and the area surrounding the trapdoor is completely solid. Human or not, that worries me. I will leave the camera set up for now and, hopefully, gather some further information, maybe get a clearer picture of their face. Whatever this individual may be, I do not want to confront them unprepared.

End supplemental

[The Magnus Archives Theme - Outro]

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