

MAG – 081 – A Guest for Mr Spider

Content warnings:

- Spiders
- Murder
- Child abuse, harm, and death
- Compulsions (supernatural)

Discussions of: parental death, anxiety & panic, emotional abuse, gore

Mentions of: character death, grief & loss

SFX: low drone, high pitched tone

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill presents: The Magnus Archives. Episode eighty-one. A guest for Mr Spider.

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro – Continues]

[Tape clicks on.]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Jonathan Sims, Head Arch– (**pause**) former Head Archivist at the Magnus Institute, London, regarding a childhood encounter with a book formerly possessed by Jurgen Leitner. Statement recorded by subject, February 18th, 2017.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

I have been thinking a lot over the last couple of days about how this began. For me, that is. I cannot help but feel that hand in hand with the death of Jurgen Leitner came the death of the lens through which I viewed the world. Even in the depths of my paranoia, something I now attribute to the presence of... of the being that was posing as Sasha, like a grain of sand behind my eye, rubbing and irritating, but with no clear cause.

Even then, I knew how the world worked. There were supernatural things in the world, but they were rare – isolated and exaggerated, vastly outnumbered by wild tales and drunken imaginings. The one name I held in my mind as a true source of evil was Jurgen Leitner, and I knew him as the worst of it, for it was his name that had marked the encounter that scarred my youth. And of course, in my heart, I knew that no-one else could have possibly seen anything as horrible as I had. Well, maybe I could have named one person, but... I watched him disappear forever.

But now I know what Jurgen Leitner truly was. A spoiled child, playing with forces he barely understood, calling himself a jailor to things he couldn't even conceptualise. There is so much more horror in this world than I had ever dreamt possible. And my suffering, I now know, pales in comparison to what has befallen others far more innocent than I. But perhaps not for long.

These beings that lurk beyond us know my name and, if I understand Leitner correctly, one of them has already claimed me. The Eye. Appropriate, I suppose. I do not know how many of them there are, or precisely how they separate, but I do know that the Eye – Beholding – was not the first that I

encountered in my life. The first was the Spider. The Web. And I have no idea what that might mean.

I was eight years old when my grandmother gave me the book. No-one ever believes me when I tell them my age. I don't know if it's the already greying hair or something in my demeanour, but they always act surprised when I mention being a child in the Nineties. I will admit the last few years have aged me considerably. Regardless, it must have been a year or two since the library was destroyed, though I had no inkling of it at the time.

My parents had passed away when I was too young to really remember them; my father of an accidental fall when I was two, and my mother a couple of years later from complications during routine surgery. My extended family weren't close and I had no siblings, so I ended up living with my grandmother, a kind enough woman, but she had already raised her children, and the resentment she felt at having to raise another was never something she completely managed to hide from me. It seemed to mingle with her grief, so the sadness over her own lost son would manifest in recriminations and bitterness.

Saying this aloud I worry I'm painting too bleak a picture of my grandmother. She cared for me as well as she was able, and whatever her private feelings might have been, she did try her best.

And I was hardly an easy child to deal with. While I may not have shared the inclinations of my peers towards active mischief, I was precocious and impatient, quick to talk back, and even quicker to wander off whenever I grew bored. By the time I was eight, the police had had to return me from my explorations at least three times, and my grandmother swore that if it

happened again she would begin locking me inside the house. And I fully believed her.

She did discover that the one thing that could keep me rooted to the spot were books. Television pacified me for a half hour or so, but a book would keep me in place until I had finished it, and for all the voracity of my reading, I was never actually that fast, lingering on pages that caught my imagination. So in this she saw a solution. The difficulty was I was also very picky, and looking back on it there was little rhyme or reason to what I did or did not care to read. I never tried to really define it, but I think the closest I could come to putting it into words was that I hated to read anything I felt like I had read before. This made it something of a nightmare to keep me entertained, as any author with a distinctive enough style would only ever afford me a single book's worth of reading before I tired of them. I can still hear my grandmother's voice, trying to hide that irritation bubbling up: "But you like Diana Wynne Jones!"

In the end, she came up with a solution that now seems like a stroke of genius, although at the time I found it strange and bothersome. The local library was some distance away, so between visits, my grandmother would go to all the local charity and second-hand bookshops and buy up every book they had that was fifty pence or less, then she would present me the pile and I would look through it until I found something I liked, or at least tolerated, and then I would read that. After I was completely done with the pile, she would donate it to one of the other charity shops.

It wasn't something that could be kept up forever, but it worked for longer than you'd think. It was shortly after she had started with this system that I found... my first Leitner.

One of the things that annoyed me most about my grandmother's approach was that she never seemed to exercise any sort of judgement at all about how appropriate something might be for me. I didn't mind this so much when it let me read a slightly-too-gruesome thriller, but she would also often present me with stacks full of bright, square cardboard books, of the sort you'd read aloud to a pre-schooler. These bothered me far more than any dull technical manual or dog-eared dictionary, as I couldn't help but feel it was making a comment about my intelligence. I mean, obviously that was absurd – I watched my grandmother grabbing the books without even glancing at their covers, just checking the price and stacking them. But somehow, it still felt like an insult that she might in some way think I was at a level to be reading *The Elephant and the Balloon*, or whatever nonsense it was.

So, when searching through the latest trove of books, I felt my hand grip another square, thin volume, I almost discarded it without even looking. But I did look. And what I saw immediately struck me as odd. Instead of the garish colours that I expected, the cover was monochrome, matt white with scratchy black webs covering its corners, and in the middle of the cover, half-written, half-carved in a childlike hand was the title: *A Guest for Mr. Spider*.

On the back cover there was no blurb, just a crudely sketched image of what I assumed to be the eponymous Mr. Spider. He stood upright on his spindly back legs, attached to a disproportionately swollen abdomen. The rest of his legs were splayed at odd angles, as though in the middle of some sort of dance, and his head had no mouth, but was covered asymmetrically with eight eyes of all shapes and sizes. On the top of it there sat a small bowler hat, which had been drawn in a splash of red ink, unlike the black and white which made up the rest of the image.

I was a bit taken aback. I had seen plenty of children's books that tried to be a little bit scary, or ended up being unintentionally disturbing, but this felt different. There was something to this drawing, to this book, that I'd never seen before. A violence seemed to ooze from it, sticky and pungent. I had no idea what was inside, but I knew that I hated that book. And I knew that wasn't going to stop me opening it. You know what was immediately inside the cover. If you're in a position to be listening to this, you know exactly whose mark was there.

The book itself starts with a blank room in a simple house, almost entirely bare save for a small table with a pot of flowers on it and two doors. The flowers are drooping in a way that might just be a poor rendering of bluebells, but with the black and white it just makes them look sick.

In the centre of the room stands the figure I take to be Mr. Spider, his arms are still splayed wildly, and his back is turned to the reader. He is staring, it seems, at the door on the left. On the next page the image is identical, save that the arms are now in different places. The third and the fourth are the same again. There is no text on any of them.

Then, on page five, the words 'KNOCK KNOCK' appear next to the door in the same style as the words of the title. Mr. Spider's arms are suddenly straight and still by his side. The text comes again: 'WHO IS IT, MR. SPIDER?'

The door opens, and stood there is a thin, scrawny looking fly clutching a box. It is crudely dressed in an ill-fitting suit. It is hard to tell from the fly's face, but his attitude seems to be one of trepidation or anxiety. 'IT'S MR. BLUEBOTTLE', the text reads, 'AND HE'S BROUGHT YOU A CAKE'. The next page is a close-up rendering of a large slice of cake in a box; it does have colour, but it's a pale

green that makes me think of disease. Then comes a page showing the insectoid face of Mr. Bluebottle, the worry now stark etched there. Then there is a page with no picture at all, just the words: ‘MR. SPIDER DOESN’T LIKE IT’.

Then the book returns to the room. Both doors are once again closed. The only difference between this image and the one on the very first page is the ink that seems to have been spilled on the lower half of the right-hand door. There are several more pages of Mr. Spider waiting, his arms a windmill of activity.

Then another ‘KNOCK KNOCK’ on the left door, and Mr. Spider goes rigid. ‘WHO IS IT, MR. SPIDER?’ In that position it’s clear his belly is even larger than it was before. The door opens on another fly, this one slightly larger, wearing a pale yellow dress. ‘IT’S MRS. FRUIT’, the book announces, ‘AND SHE’S BROUGHT YOU SOME FLOWERS’. The flowers on the next page look even less healthy than the ones on the table, and are coloured with a gentle pink. A close-up on her face, frozen in stark fear. ‘MR. SPIDER DOESN’T EAT FLOWERS’, the next page announces, and Mrs. Fruit is gone, the door closed again.

The right-hand door is more noticeably stained now; the once-black ink now seems like a dark, crusty brown at the hinges and the seams. The flowers brought by the doomed fruit fly now stand on the table, but they are more clearly wilted and stained a deep, vivid red. Mr. Spider’s abdomen is engorged and straining, and where his mouth would be is marked by the same dried brown colour as the door. His arms are moving once again.

On the messier page, with more colour to contrast it, I can see that his hands aren’t empty, but are weaving and pulling on thin grey threads, that stretch all around the room, and out through the cracks in both doors.

'KNOCK KNOCK. WHO IS IT, MR. SPIDER?' Behind the door stands a large, burly fly, this one dressed in baggy overalls. Next to it stands a much smaller fly, dressed in what appears to be a child's version of those same overalls. They are both openly weeping. 'IT'S MR. HORSE. AND HE'S BROUGHT YOU HIS SON'. The close-up on that fly's face is an image that still comes to me when I'm having trouble sleeping. Then the text: 'MR. SPIDER WANTS MORE.'

When we go back to the picture of the empty parlour it's smeared all over with dark reds and browns. Mr. Spider's abdomen now dwarfs the rest of him and seeps a sticky red, along with the now clearly visible grey thread. He has turned to face the reader. Staring into me as his arms move and move and move.

The second-to-last page shows the right-hand door up close, the stains and the ink seeping from the edges. It looks like it has a cut-away panel that can be opened onto the final page. 'MR. SPIDER WANTS ANOTHER GUEST FOR DINNER' it reads, 'IT IS POLITE TO KNOCK'. I feel my hand closing into a fist and reaching for the door, preparing to rap my knuckles on the grimy old wood.

It was at that moment that a hand far bigger than my own slapped the book from my grip, before shoving me hard in the chest and sending me sprawling onto the floor. I was in the park a few roads away from my house. Had I taken the book there to read? Or did I somehow wander there while engrossed in it? To this day I don't know, but I was in the park, and standing over me was... you know, for the life of me I can't remember his name. Thomas, maybe? Daniel? I almost want to say Michael, but that isn't it. He saved my life, and I can't remember his name. Why does your memory do that to so many important people? Some people deserve to be remembered.

He was a bully. Eighteen or nineteen, I think. He helped my grandmother with odd jobs sometimes, just a bit of cash-in-hand work, but he had always taken a dislike to me. At the time I had convinced myself that it was because of how smart I was, since he was, to put it charitably, not very clever, but I have since come to the conclusion that I was a deeply annoying child. Still, he was more than twice my age, so I'm certainly not excusing his decision to torment me whenever he got the chance. Name-calling, the odd beating, sometimes stealing from me – all very standard. He just made the extremely poor choice to do it at that exact moment.

My tormentor bent down and picked up what he had slapped out of my hands and examined the book. I was too dazed to protest, and he started to mock “little Einstein” for reading “a kiddie book”. But as he did so, he flicked through it, and as his eyes passed over more and more of the page, the words tailed off, and he seemed to be reading it himself. His hands shook ever so slightly as he slowly made his way through it, and his legs began to move. It was jerky and unsteady, and he didn't seem to notice that he was doing it.

I had no idea what was going on, not really, but I was somehow desperate to get that book back. He was much bigger than me, though, so all I could do was follow as he walked down alleys and side streets. There were fewer and fewer people about, and I realised with a start that I had failed to notice nightfall. At the far end of a quiet residential road, he walked up to one of the houses. I never found it again, and for all I knew it might have actually been his house. He was still reading. When he reached the entrance, he held up the book and placed it on the front door. I saw that cut-away panel of Mr. Spider's stained and bloody right-hand door. And he knocked on it twice. I saw the words clearly in my mind almost more than I heard the sound: ‘KNOCK KNOCK’.

The door opened, and inside was dark. Against that darkness I could see the thin grey strands wrapped around the limbs of my former bully. And then, from inside, stretched two impossibly long limbs, bony and covered in coarse, black hair. For a second, there was almost the start of a scream, but the legs wrapped around him too quickly, and he disappeared into the doorway and out of sight. It slammed behind him, and he was gone, taking the book with him.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

You can see, I hope, why this engendered in me something of a fascination with the supernatural, and some deep feelings regarding the name ‘Jurgen Leitner’. I cannot corroborate this story in any real form for obvious reasons. My grandmother peacefully passed away five years ago and there is no-one else who would have records of anything other than the general context. If I were assessing this as someone else’s statement, I would have dismissed it out of hand, and don’t think that doesn’t eat at me. But it is so vivid in my mind. The spider’s legs reaching from that tiny door. The first of the dark powers to touch me, perhaps, but it did not claim me.

Speaking this out loud for the first time, I am struck by something else. The feeling I have been living with my whole life, that if that poor idiot hadn’t gotten involved he would still be alive. A strange conviction that, if I had been able to face that thing myself, maybe I could have saved him.

Stopped it. Ridiculous, of course, I was eight, but it has made me reconsider my attitude to getting help. I have consistently kept the others at arm’s length, tried to deal with things myself and it... it hasn’t gone well. Whatever is going

on, this ‘Unknowing’ that S– *Not!* Sasha was talking about, Elias killing Gertrude and maybe Leitner as well... I need help. I need allies. I just wish this revelation didn’t come just as everyone is convinced I’m a deranged killer.

[**There’s the sound of a front door unlocking and someone entering the room.]**

ARCHIVIST

Oh, um... hello!

GEORGIE

Everything okay, John?

[**Georgie closes the door.]**

ARCHIVIST

Er, yeah. Just recording some thoughts. Didn’t... I didn’t know when you were going to be home.

GEORGIE

Sure. (**Pause**) Did you... clean the kitchen?

ARCHIVIST

Er, a bit. I, I mean, I can’t exactly pay you anything; I thought...

GEORGIE

It’s fine. To be honest, it’s nice to have someone keep the Admiral company while I’m out.

ARCHIVIST

He literally just sleeps on the radiator. I... I've got a lot of time to kill.

GEORGIE

You... looking for a new job yet?

ARCHIVIST

It's complicated, there's... there's a lot of stuff hanging over from the last one I've got to take care of.

GEORGIE

Well, like I said, you're welcome here as long as you need.

ARCHIVIST

I suppose you are rolling in all that sock money.

GEORGIE

Urgh.

ARCHIVIST

Up to your eyeballs in mattresses.

GEORGIE

Don't. They did send me one, you know. Oh, it was dreadful. I couldn't sleep on it. I managed three days before my back gave out. I've still got it somewhere in the guest room, if the other one's not up to your exacting standards.

ARCHIVIST

Ooh... I think I'm alright. I was going to make a cup of tea if you want one?

GEORGIE

Maybe later, I've got recording of my own to do.

ARCHIVIST

Right you are. I'll... I'll keep quiet.

GEORGIE

I wouldn't worry too much. The studio's pretty well soundproofed.

ARCHIVIST

What's this one about?

GEORGIE

Oh, I'm trying to find some new angle on the Ancient Ram Inn.

ARCHIVIST

I thought there'd already been a *What the Ghost* on that?

GEORGIE

No. No, you're thinking of every *other* hacky, ghost podcast. But, you know, if it sells a few T-shirts....

ARCHIVIST

Oh, I, yes, I meant to say, actually, thank you for –

GEORGIE

Oh, it's fine. Though I don't know what sort of "employment dispute" leaves you without a change of clothes.

ARCHIVIST

You wouldn't believe me.

GEORGIE

Do you even listen to my podcast? I'll believe anything. But, on air.

ARCHIVIST

I will tell you, Georgie, I... I just...

GEORGIE

It's alright. There's no rush. I mean, it was clearly pretty bad, so only when you're ready. If you're ready.

ARCHIVIST

Thanks. I... Thank you.

GEORGIE

Sure. Anyway, I got recording to be doing. Catch you after.

ARCHIVIST

Yeah.

[Georgie leaves. The Archivist exhales. The tape is switched off.]

[The Magnus Archives Theme - Outro]

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