

MAG – 083 – Drawing a Blank

Content warnings:

- Mannequins
- Murder
- Body horror

Discussions of: Insomnia, trauma, paranormal encounter

Mentions of: ableism, human remains, paranoia, strangulation

SFX: low drone, high pitched tone

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill presents: The Magnus Archives. Episode eighty-three. Drawing a Blank.

[The Magnus Archives theme – intro – continues.]

[Tape clicks on.]

GEORGIE

Sure, I just – Why?

ARCHIVIST

I just do. It's, it's my job. I record them.

GEORGIE

The job you just lost.

ARCHIVIST

Uh... yes.

GEORGIE

That one you lost so badly it somehow cost you all your stuff?

ARCHIVIST

Well, it's not quite that simple.

GEORGIE

Well, how am I to know?

ARCHIVIST

Look, Georgie, it's not... You don't need to worry. I mean, I'm not, I'm not on drugs or anything.

(Georgie laughs)

What? **(Pause)** I could be on drugs!

GEORGIE

Sure. I just... I know that you get obsessive about stuff, and this right here, I... I'm guessing someone dragged you into something weird, you got hooked in and then it all went wrong.

ARCHIVIST

I mean, that is almost exactly what happened.

GEORGIE

So what you need now is... distance.

ARCHIVIST

You're right. You're right. I just... I need to record it.

GEORGIE

No, you don't. This is not going to help. It's part of the problem, isn't it? Look me in the eyes and tell me that it's not part of the cult or whatever the hell it was that left you homeless. (**Pause**) Come on. What's it been, four days?

ARCHIVIST

Yeah. Yeah.

GEORGIE

It drops through the letter box and you spend four days... like this. It's not – It isn't right, John. You don't sleep...

ARCHIVIST

I've been investigating.

GEORGIE

Hmm.

ARCHIVIST

Please, Georgie, I just need... I need to record it. That's all. Then it's done.

GEORGIE

Fine. Fine... But you have got to deal with whatever this is.

ARCHIVIST

I will. I, I promise.

GEORGIE

Okay. And just so you know: not keen on your weird stalkers knowing my address. Not keen on that.

ARCHIVIST

Right.

[Georgie leaves, shutting the door behind her.]

Right.

Statement of Chloe Ashburt, regarding a new window display at Fanton's department store in Hammersmith. Original statement given 19th October 2013. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Hea—

Audio recording by Jonathan Sims.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Working in a large department store can be kind of strange. I've had jobs in a couple over the last few years, and talked to people who've worked in others, and they all seem to operate slightly differently.

Some treat every department almost as a separate business, with its own dedicated team, some move their workforce around regularly, so they don't get too comfortable. A few operate almost entirely by leasing out spaces to

specific companies, like the individual perfume or makeup counters, so you have an array of small, isolated teams on their little island of product.

I personally prefer the second sort, as it gives me an opportunity to work with a lot of different people and products, and I have a tendency to get... bored if everything gets too samey for too long.

So Fanton's worked pretty well for me, at least at first. I mean, it's not like customer service is my passion; the public is a moaning, dreadful bunch, but it was only a part-time job to put me through art school, and my colleagues were mostly a decent lot.

What I did enjoy, and what I tried to be involved in every time it came up, were the displays. I was mainly studying illustration, but I'd always had an interest in design more generally, so when the seasons turned and we changed up the displays in the windows and on the shop floor, I always made a point to try and be on the team helping to set them up. My line manager, Lana, knew this and generally let me do so.

I'm not sure I actually sped things up, to be honest. I'm a bit of a perfectionist, and between posing and dressing the mannequins and setting up the props, I think I probably delayed the whole process more than a bit, but everyone was very patient with me as I directed them on how I thought they should assemble the bits I couldn't easily reach.

I sometimes wonder whether, if I'd left this display alone, or even let Lana do it, things might have turned out differently, but in the end it is what it is, and I'm just going to have to live with it.

This was about a month ago, just as we were starting to put out the autumn displays. These are always my favourites because, aside from the obvious

duffle coats and Hallowe'en stuff, the slightly more... unexpected or avant-garde displays tended to be up over the autumn.

The theme for this particular one was 'Nights at the Circus'. There were acrobat mannequins in hoops, a rather well-made paper maché lion and the centrepiece: a mannequin set up like a ringmistress, dressed in some of the more theatrical clothes that Fanton's was selling that season.

Topped with a bright red top hat and clutching a whip, it created rather a striking effect; I spent longer than I should have trying to get it absolutely perfect. When it was done, though, I knew it had been worth it. The shiny blank face stared out from below the vivid red, and the hand clutched the whip at such an angle it seemed as though the smooth plastic flesh might leap to life any second with a crack.

There was one other reason I quite enjoyed working at Fanton's, and that was it gave me ample opportunity to practise my figure drawing. Because of my classes I tended to end up working the later shifts, and Lana would usually let me stay past closing time, where I would spend hours drawing and redrawing each static figure – the different poses and costumes and displays gave me fantastic practise. It was almost meditative. I'll always be grateful to Lana for letting my do that – a lot of the higher-ups were kind of arseholes about it, hiding behind faux-concern that "my condition made closing up on my own potentially dangerous", but Lana, to her credit, ignored them and we never had an issue. Well, not that sort of issue, at least.

So obviously, once the 'Nights at the Circus' display went up, I spent several evenings drawing and redrawing it, copying every curve of the almost featureless face, the line of the limbs, the poise of the feet, over and over until

I got it right. So when I came in one day to find that the ringmistress mannequin had been replaced, I knew instantly. It was wearing the same clothes, certainly, and was posed the same way, but I could see the difference.

If I hadn't known it in such detail, I never would have noticed. Certainly no-one else mentioned it, and when I asked Lana if there'd been a change, she just gave me a blank look. I was sure, though. The arms were just a little bit longer, the neck ever-so-slightly twisted, and the face, where before there had just been the faintest hint of a nose and a slight smile, was almost completely blank, save for a small patch of broken plastic near its forehead.

Sometime after I had left the previous night, someone must have snuck in, undressed and removed the mannequin already there, and put the clothes on this new one before replacing it in the exact same position. It didn't make any sense.

I thought about trying to bring more attention to it, but nothing had been stolen, and the changes were so small that, even if I could convince them, what were they going to do about it? So I kept quiet. I was working in the soft furnishings department that week, and the mannequin was down in Womenswear, so I didn't see it that much. Even so, any time I had an excuse to go past it, I made sure I did. There was something about this new one, something in the way it didn't quite fit with all the other figures on display, the way it held the whip in cruel, sharp fingers. And the way its head never moved, but somehow I couldn't shake the feeling that it was watching me right back.

Disconcerting as it was, there wasn't really anything I could do about it, and after a few days I was starting to get used to the replacement. I had almost

convinced myself I was overreacting, if not actually mistaken, when I was called in to Lana's office, just as I got into work.

Her expression was stern, and she told me to close the door behind me when I came in. She asked me if I'd stayed late the night before, after closing time, and I told her yes I had. I started to talk about what I'd been drawing, but she held up her hand to stop me. She asked if I had done anything other than that, whether I had tried out "any other artistic pursuits". I was confused and told her as much, and she asked me if I'd seen anyone else there last night and I said no I hadn't. Then she asked if I'd messed with any of the displays and once again I said no.

She sighed, and I couldn't tell whether it was in relief or exasperation, but she opened her desk drawer and retrieved some printouts. They were photos of one of the autumn displays. I had noticed on the way in, when I'd gone past that particular window, which had previously been showing off raincoats, I believe, it had been empty. In the picture, however, it was not.

The raincoat mannequin had, it seemed, been... disassembled, then rebuilt into a tangled bunch of limbs and joints. The torso was upside down and the two arms jutted out from the front and back of the pelvis, bending up to hold the mannequin's head aloft. It had been dressed in an assortment of lurid red and purple shirts from our pyjama range, and someone had clearly stolen some paints from the craft department and daubed a colourful, smiling face on top of the blank space that had previously been there. They had finished it with a red pompom crudely glued onto the top of the head. The effect was alarming and put me in mind of a clown.

I looked up to see Lana's eyes staring into me, acutely scrutinizing my reaction. The confusion and mild horror on my face seemed to put her a little bit at ease, but she was still a long way from relaxed. I told her it wasn't me, that I had no idea who would have done it or why, that I definitely didn't see or hear anything out of the ordinary, all the standard excuses. She nodded, though it was clear nothing I said was really helping the situation. Finally, I asked about CCTV, and she shook her head. There hadn't been any focused on the vandalised display, and whoever had done it had clearly known enough about the camera placements to avoid them. Another reason, apparently, they suspected it was done by someone who worked there.

We went back and forth for about ten minutes, until at last she said she believed me, and wouldn't pursue disciplinary action, but without any other credible explanation there was no way she could keep letting me stay behind alone. Not least because, technically, she shouldn't even have been doing it in the first place. I was upset, of course, but I also realised I was getting off comparatively lightly, so I didn't make a fuss.

The next couple of weeks were difficult. Drawing the displays in the shop had helped me centre myself, gave me some positive associations with the place. Without it, Fanton's was just where I worked. And more importantly, somewhere I constantly had to deal with the public, all their rudeness and stupidity and fake pity. To be honest, I was finding it harder and harder to keep my patience.

There was something else, though. Without being able to rely on me to close up, Lana had assigned it on a rota to the others in our team. Nobody really wanted the job, and a few of them moaned to me privately, but they didn't exactly have a say in the matter. But as the days went by I noticed that some of

my colleagues were getting nervous, jumping at little noises and glancing over their shoulder. It always seemed to be the person who'd been closing up the night before. And through it all that ringmistress stood there, malicious and unmoving, brandishing her whip ready to strike.

Finally it happened. Last Wednesday, Lana couldn't find anyone else to do the last shift, Jan had a doctor's appointment, Liam had a family emergency... you get the idea. Lana was going to have to do it herself. I'd been working very hard over the days prior to get back in her good graces, and I managed to convince her to let me do the last shift with her, and stick around to do some drawing while she locked up, promising that I'd be out of the door as soon as she was. She reluctantly agreed.

So Wednesday rolled around, and the day went very much as normal, maybe a bit quieter than usual, but not so you'd notice. There was a slight... something in the air though, an anticipation. I thought at the time it was me, since I'd decided to use this opportunity to try and exorcise some of the feelings of unease and finally draw the mannequin that was making me so uncomfortable. But now I don't think I had anything to do with it at all.

Everything was closed up, everyone else had left. It was just me and Lana. And she was making the final checks to lock up. I ran to the changing rooms and grabbed the small bag from my locker that contained my pencils, inks and paper, and then hurried back and over to the womenswear department. I couldn't hear Lana anywhere, which is strange as she usually provided something of a running commentary, but I didn't really notice.

Then I rounded the corner of one of the aisles and stopped dead: the mannequin was gone. The pedestal where the 'Nights at the Circus' display had

stood was empty, save for a torn pile of paper maché and the headless figure of a plastic acrobat.

I stood there, my mouth hanging open, as I tried to figure out what was going on. Had Lana done this? Was this all some elaborate ploy to frame me for... something, vandalism? That didn't make any sense. The store around me was still and silent, and it felt as if all I could do was wait for something to happen. And sure enough, after a minute or two, I heard Lana's voice calling to me.

Except it didn't sound quite right. There was a strangled, hoarse quality to it, like the words were being pushed out against her will. I was terrified of what I would see when I reached her, but my only other option was to run, and if she was in trouble, I'd never forgive myself. I pulled out my phone and pressed 999, my thumb hovering over the call button as I approached the storeroom where Lana's voice was coming from. The door's small window was too high, so I just had to push it open. It was so heavy against my shaking hands.

The room was dark on the other side. I reached up to turn on the lights, but the switch flipped uselessly back and forth. The light from the door illuminated a few boxes of leggings, but I couldn't bring myself to go any further in. Just beyond the light from the door I could see a figure, tall and thin. It could have been Lana, but I wasn't sure.

At least until it began to move. Its steps were jerky and stiff, arms snapping out and back as it moved towards me step by step. I felt my own limbs seize up at the sight, and my phone slipped uselessly from my hand. The faceless figure loomed over me, and when it bent down, the finger it placed upon my lips was cold, hard plastic.

"Shhhhh..." it said. Though it had no mouth to form the sound.

The next thing I remember is the police. I must have pressed dial before I dropped my phone. They found what was left of Lana further into the storeroom. I was questioned for a while, but much to the dismay of tabloid headlines everywhere, it became clear quite quickly that there was no way I could have done it. The CCTV showed me almost constantly during the period Lana would have been killed, and the only blood on me was a single, neat line across my lip.

Of course, that's not to say the police believed my version of events either. They are currently working on the theory that a killer had been stalking the store for a while, and finally chose that night to strike, but they didn't expect me to still be there, and fled when it was clear I'd called the police. But I know. I remember. Sometimes I wake up in the night, and I can taste the blood and plastic of that stiff and lifeless hand.

Statement ends.

ARCHIVIST

As I have discovered in the few days since this statement arrived, it is far harder to conduct a thorough investigation without the resources of the Institute or the... expertise of my assistants. I have located a few stories about the death of Lana Billings, found... strangled and partially skinned in the storage of Fanton's department store, but the rather lurid newspaper coverage is as much as I could find, and it gives no further information of use.

Well, that's not quite true. The *Express* illustrates their story with a picture of the service entrance to Fanton's, the entrance the killer is assumed to have used to access the storeroom. I do not know whether this picture was taken before or after the crime, or whether it's a stock photo, but I cannot help but

notice, parked just at the edge, is an off-white delivery van. The resolution is not high enough to make out the name on the side, but I'm not sure I need to.

I've had little luck in tracking down Ms. Ashburt herself. I managed to find a legal transcript from 2011 regarding a wrongful dismissal case she brought against a previous employer, the firing she claimed as being motivated by her dwarfism, but none of the parties involved had any up-to-date information on her. Something of a dead end.

There are some connections here, though what they might mean I... I just don't know. Circuses, skin, things just a few degrees off from human. The mannequin, I would assume, has some connection to this 'Stranger' being. The same one we've... had such problems with already.

Breekon and Hope... might also be connected to it. I recall they made a delivery to a taxidermy shop in a previous statement, I think, which brings us back to skin. Not to mention more than one witness has described them as... as uncanny, not quite seeming like real people. Until I am more certain of the identities of the other powers out there, I am going to assume Breekon and Hope are at least working with, if not part of, the Stranger.

Of course, the biggest mystery to this statement is who sent it to me. And why? There's no return address and, something I'm glad Georgie didn't spot, no postmark. Which means it was delivered by hand. Does someone from the Institute know where I am, or is it someone else?

And why this statement? It links in with a lot of what I'm already looking into, but if there are any revelations in it, I can't find them. Or is it a warning? Emphasising that if I simply wait and see what happens, if I don't act on what I know, then someone I care about may pay the price. If that's the case, then I

think... message received. Hiding won't bring any answers, and it won't stop whatever's going on. I'm going to keep looking into where this statement came from, but it wasn't sent in vain. I've got work to do.

Recording ends.

[Tape clicks off]

[The Magnus Archives Theme - Outro]

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