

MAG – 114 – Cracked Foundation

Content Warnings:

- Spiders
- Mental instability
- Language
- Body horror

[Tape clicks on.]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Anya Villette, regarding a cleaning job on Hill Top Road. Original statement given April 22nd 2009. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

I don't know this place. They said I should come and talk to you. A few people did. People I thought I knew, but they were different. I should know this place, I think. I used to go to the Tate a lot when I lived in London, and I, I passed the building, but... I don't know you people. Nothing makes sense anymore.

It was meant to be just a quick job. Since the divorce I've been back working as a cleaner, and for the last month or so John Hector Lettings in Oxford have been bringing me in to get student houses ready for next year's occupants. It's not always pleasant work. After all, students are not exactly careful tenants; I've had to spend more than one afternoon scraping and repainting bedroom

walls for some soon-to-be-dropout that turned the room into a hotbox. But it pays the bills. Barely.

I guess this is why I was so keen when I got the call about Hill Top Road. A nice, simple job. No pulling out instant noodles from behind the oven. No post-grad party gunk to find behind the sofa. Just a newly built house that needed a good clean once the builders were finished. Hoover up some plaster dust, wipe down the counters, a bit of polish on the metal fittings... easy. If there were already beds in there, maybe I'd grab a quick nap, make up for all the unpaid overtime I'd had to put in steam cleaning the last house where some of them had made active use of the bedroom. All told I thought it was the break I'd earned, and not a moment too soon.

It was raining when I pulled into the house. Not heavy, but the sky was that soggy grey that lets you know the weather isn't changing anytime soon. As a rule I don't mind the rain too much, but there was nothing relaxing about this weather. No regular thump of droplets tapping on bin lids or windscreens; you just ended up damp and grumpy. I've been thinking back, trying to remember if I got any kind of... sense about that house. Whether the windows were darker than they should have been, or if the frame of the place was... heavier. I don't know. Hard to tell, I was too busy trying to manoeuvre the keys without having to put my bag down on the waterlogged path. It wasn't until I actually got through the door that anything seemed to be at all wrong.

Even then it was only small things. Easy to ignore. I'm not superstitious, never used to be at least, so how dim the lights were made me think the owners were cheap; maybe they'd decided to go all-in on those weak energy-saving bulbs. The cold? I just thought it was an empty house that hadn't turned the

heating on yet. The small movements of the dust covers... that was the first thing that actually caught my attention.

The owners of the house had already filled it with furniture. Not good furniture, of course: just the cheapest IKEA had that wouldn't collapse under the weight of a textbook. It was all assembled, though, and... covered with thick sheets of white plastic, to try and keep the dust off.

Not a strange sight in my line of work, so I just ignored it, and headed down to the kitchen to start wiping down the surfaces.

I don't know why I always like to start in the kitchen; it sort of feels like the heart of a home, at least to me, and I like to begin there and work outwards. Or maybe I just like food, and by the time I start on a job, I'm usually already hungry for lunch. That said, the sort of houses I usually clean, I'm more likely to lose that appetite when I stumble on something in the kitchen. This one was already almost pristine, though. A bit of dust on the surfaces, some careless flecks of paint was the worst I had to contend with. Even the oven was spotless and new. But as I was wiping down the sink, I sort of zoned out. The window in the kitchen looked out over the garden, and... I froze as I noticed that in the centre, there was a tree. It was still bare from the winter, and from the top of it, there were these eight thick branches, just stretching out at all angles, some... reaching up to the sky, and some... it felt like they were reaching towards me. It was almost black against the dark grey sky, and the rain made it shine. My mouth was dry, and I suddenly had this... vision in my head, of walking out the back door, and standing at the base of that tree, as those branches bent, and snapped, and came down to grab me. But I was in the kitchen, and I was still dry. I finished up quickly, and headed off to do the rest of the house.

I tried to ignore it, just told myself I was having a weird bit of paranoia. Getting myself worked up over nothing. I don't believe in ghosts, you know, and even if I did, it was a new house. It's not like anyone's building over ancient burial grounds in East Oxford. But even then I was finding it hard to ignore the movements. Slight rustles in the dust sheets that covered the furniture. Shadows they made that didn't... quite work with the shape they should be. Or this lump or angle, sometimes, so I'd wonder if they were just covering chairs. Whenever I turned around I swear I heard them shift, and when I looked back, I can't be sure, but I think they would be different, covering something different. I never got the nerve up to take any of them off, though. I just pressed on, tried to get the place clean and finished as quick as I could. Living room, bathroom, upstairs bedrooms... it was almost getting dark by the time I was finished.

It was such a relief as I started to pack up my bag, and I was just about to zip it closed when I remembered the cupboard under the stairs. It hadn't been included in the job list, but in most houses I cleaned I liked to give the storage spaces a bit of a tidy and a vacuum as well. It always brought up by my employers as 'evidence of my thoroughness', and I took a lot of pride in it.

But in my hurry to be finished and out of Hill Top Road, I hadn't even checked it. I looked at the small door, then back to my half-zipped bag, and... I decided to just take a quick look. Just a quick look. It was a new house. How dirty could it be?

Obviously it was my decision. I remember the little handle was warm. I don't know if that's just my memory playing tricks on me, but I do remember that. It opened to reveal stairs going down into a basement. Nobody had mentioned a basement. Not when they gave me the job, not on the floor plan they'd given

me; I'd had absolutely no idea it was there. I found my legs were shaking as my brain pushed forward one question over and over: do they expect me to clean down there?

I decided, again, just to have a look. Just a quick look. See if there was anything down there that did need my attention. Maybe it was already spotless, or maybe it hadn't been tanked, and was still just bare brick and stone, too raw for me to do anything with anyway. I just had to check.

It was warmer down there, warmer every step, and I found myself brushing cobwebs from my face as I got further down, until at last there I was – stood in the cellar of Hill Top Road. There was just a very quick second of relief, of letting my breath out. I saw how damp it was, full of unfinished brickwork, definitely not something any estate agent would expect me to clean. And then I noticed the crack.

It seemed to split the floor right down the middle; it was jagged, vicious, like something had torn out the ground with a hook. It was maybe a foot across at its widest, and so dark inside it made my teeth ache. I'm not sure how I saw it. Thinking now I know that there wasn't any light down there, but... that horrid gap was clear as day, darker than just the simple lack of light that surrounded it. And then I was at the edge looking down, and those eight spindly arms reaching up to pull me in. I couldn't have screamed even if I wanted to.

I woke up in one of the chairs, the dust cover clinging to me like a cocoon. I threw it off, and ran out of that house, and I haven't been back. But now... everything's wrong. I went to clean that house on April the 23rd 2009 which, according to all of you, is tomorrow. But it can't be.

That was two weeks ago. I've tried to talk to my friends about it. Those of my friends I can find, but they seem distant, like they don't really know me. Everything is just... wrong. I can't find my favourite coffee shop. And I don't know who you people are.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

Interesting. I'm not really sure what to do with this one. Martin brought it up, said he'd found one that related back to Hill Top Road, a thread that's been nagging at me for a while, but... I mean, it seems straightforward enough, except... that it never happened. As far as I can tell, Anya Villette doesn't exist. John Hector Lettings does seem to be a real estate agents in Oxford, but according to our enquiries they've never employed anyone by that name to work as a cleaner, nor are they currently responsible for the infamous house. Basira found a couple of possibilities online that might have been her, but the two that almost matched, both professed complete ignorance to any of this. As far as we can tell, the house has no estate agent looking after it, and no current owner. Certainly no plans to lease it students. I've half a mind to just go down and have a look at it myself, but... I don't know. Ever since it first came up I've felt like it would be... just a very bad idea. We've been trying to get a closer look at the documents, figure out who technically owns the place, but... it's been over year, and we're still waiting. Haven't really had the time to foll—

[There's a noise – Tim is entering the room from the tunnels.]

Ah...

(The Archivist takes a deep breath.)

[The sound of something wooden being moved – a trap door, or covering perhaps.]

ARCHIVIST

Hello Tim.

TIM

Oh god...

ARCHIVIST

Come in, please.

TIM

(False politeness) Good to see you, Boss. How've you been?

ARCHIVIST

I'm not going to lie to you, Tim. It's been a difficult few months.

TIM

(Deadpan) Good.

ARCHIVIST

And h— I would like to hear how you've been doing.

TIM

Me? Oh, I've been just fine. I'll see you later.

ARCHIVIST

You're sure? You've not— There is nothing you want to say to me.

TIM

Nothing with that thing here, no.

ARCHIVIST

(Softly) Interesting. What do you think is listening?

TIM

What?

ARCHIVIST

What do you think is listening to the tapes?

TIM

Don't do that.

ARCHIVIST

Sorry.

TIM

Don't!

ARCHIVIST

Sorry, I didn't—

TIM

And you know what I think. It's that... the thing that runs the Institute. "The Watcher" or "The Eye" or whatever.

ARCHIVIST

I dis... I disagree. This whole place is a temple to The Eye, Tim. I don't think the tape recorders make any difference.

TIM

Elias, then.

ARCHIVIST

In that case we'll stick to talking about things he already knows.

TIM

Why are you so set on having it running?

ARCHIVIST

I... Look, if you want my honest opinion—

TIM

I don't.

ARCHIVIST

Whatever is on the other side of those tapes is just as invested in stopping the Circus as you are in avenging your brother.

TIM

You listened to it, then? My statement.

ARCHIVIST

I listened to all the tapes. I, I had no idea how much of a... a mess I left this place in, I-I-I'm sorry.

TIM

Bit of an invasion of privacy.

ARCHIVIST

I assume that's a joke?

TIM

(Laugh) Isn't it just? How did you know I was going to be here?

ARCHIVIST

Th-The others haven't seen you in weeks, and you've still been using the computers here, accessing files and books... I know there are some exits to the tunnels outside the Institute, so I guessed you were using them to get in and out, avoiding any... tape recorders.

TIM

Okay, whatever. But how did you know I was going to be here, now?

ARCHIVIST

I just... did.

TIM

“You just did”? Great. Buy one spooky telepath manager, get one free, is it? Fan—tastic.

ARCHIVIST

That’s not what this is.

TIM

Oh, and how about you read my mind now?

ARCHIVIST

Tim, that isn’t... I can’t.

TIM

‘Cause I can give you a clue. It ends in “off”.

ARCHIVIST

I... I assume you’ve been doing your own research into the Circus and the Unknowing. I would like to pool our knowledge.

TIM

So why don’t you ‘Archivist’ me, then? Just pull it straight out.

ARCHIVIST

Because I don’t want to. I am not your enemy, Tim.

TIM

Like that matters. These things aren’t human. It’s... instinct. You can’t not.

ARCHIVIST

(Quieter) I'm still me, Tim. I'm still me.

TIM

(Exhales) You know what? You're actually right.

ARCHIVIST

What?

TIM

You're the only one.

ARCHIVIST

I— S-Sorry, I do-don't follow. Tim?

TIM

Do you know why I avoid the others?

ARCHIVIST

Uh, y-you said, the tapes...

TIM

No. How can I be sure who they are?

ARCHIVIST

Oh...

TIM

You know how long that thing pretended to be Sasha?

ARCHIVIST

Oh god.

TIM

And I had no idea? I knew Sasha for years, we... **(Pause)** I don't know Martin as well as I knew her. I barely know what Melanie and Basira look like. Or that weird murder-cop. How the hell am I supposed to be sure of any of them?

ARCHIVIST

(Soft) Tim, I... I didn't realise. I-I didn't think. I'm sorry.

TIM

I mean, there's worms and hallways and clowns, and... In some ways it doesn't even register. Like, just another spook. But I can't trust them. I'm going to destroy the Circus that took my brother, and I can't trust them to help.

ARCHIVIST

And me?

TIM

(Snort) Well, if you're trying to spy on us, you're doing a pretty shitty job. You haven't been here for months.

ARCHIVIST

That's not fair! Sometimes I was kidnapped.

TIM

Which is not a good look for a spy, is it?

ARCHIVIST

Fine.

TIM

Anyway, you're a spook too now, aren't you? This place loves you too much to let you get swapped.

ARCHIVIST

What about Elias? Surely he's the same?

TIM

Oh, yeah. Great idea. **(Sarcastic)** Let's just all trust Elias.

ARCHIVIST

Point taken.

TIM

(Sigh) Screw it. I know where they're doing it. Th-The ritual. And I think they're almost ready.

ARCHIVIST

R-right. Where?

TIM

In the House of Wax, in Great Yarmouth.

ARCHIVIST

Ohhh... I thought it might be there, but th-the others, we, we couldn't find any evidence of, of movement or, well, life.

TIM

I had to wait almost two weeks. But it's there.

ARCHIVIST

Why do you think they're doing it so soon?

TIM

Skin. That's what they need right? They tried to take yours.

ARCHIVIST

Yes.

TIM

Well, last week they went on a couple of field trips to a pair of cemeteries.

ARCHIVIST

Who did they take?

TIM

New graves. No flowers. The first had a name on, no dates, no inscription.
"George Icarus".

ARCHIVIST

I, I don't know the name. Who was the other? **(When Tim doesn't respond)**

Tim?

TIM

Gertrude.

ARCHIVIST

What?

TIM

Yeah.

ARCHIVIST

I-I-I... I thought she was cremated?!

TIM

I guess not.

(The Archivist exhales)

ARCHIVIST

So they did get an Archivist's skin after all.

TIM

So, what's the plan, Boss?

ARCHIVIST

Heh. I, er... I think you're going to like it, actually.

TIM

Oh yeah?

ARCHIVIST

Should be quite... cathartic. I just need to... confirm a few details.

TIM

Fine. But you don't cut me out!

ARCHIVIST

I won't.

TIM

I—

ARCHIVIST

I promise! Now, um, if you'll excuse me.

TIM

Oh, er... er, right.

ARCHIVIST

Yes, well, you're not the only one that knows his way around the tunnels, so...

[Tape clicks off. Tape clicks off. The Archivist is now in the tunnels.]

ARCHIVIST

(Sotto voce) Thirteen, fourteen, fifteen. Sixteen.

(He whistles.)

[Footsteps]

BASIRA

All clear?

ARCHIVIST

Uh, yes. Yes! Uh, all clear.

[More footsteps]

BASIRA

Sorry, got a bit lost. Don't know how you find your way around down here.

ARCHIVIST

Practice. You alright, Daisy?

(Daisy makes non-committal sounds.)

BASIRA

Don't think either of us like it down here.

ARCHIVIST

Uh, well, no, me neither. Feels...

DAISY

Empty.

ARCHIVIST

Yeah.

BASIRA

That it?

ARCHIVIST

Yes!

DAISY

How long have you had that shirt?

BASIRA

Um...

ARCHIVIST

What?

DAISY

That shirt. You get it in China?

ARCHIVIST

Uh, A-America. I had to borrow it, there was... there was blood.

DAISY

Sure.

BASIRA

Why?

DAISY

Hmm.

BASIRA

Shall I... I'll leave you two alone. I... need to... have that chat with Elias.

[Footsteps.]

ARCHIVIST

Right. Right. Yes. So... how've you been?

DAISY

(Emotionless) Fine. Killing mannequins for Elias. And a clown. It's been alright.

ARCHIVIST

Has he... said anything about the plan?

DAISY

No. Is there one?

ARCHIVIST

Umm... Sort of.

[Sound of case being unlocked]

DAISY

(Incredulous) Ohhh. That real?

ARCHIVIST

You tell me.

DAISY

Where'd you get this?

ARCHIVIST

G-Gertrude left it. Er, apparently for, er, this exact situation.

DAISY

Where did she get it?

ARCHIVIST

I-I find myself asking that question a lot.

DAISY

So... this ritual, you're just going to blow it up?

ARCHIVIST

I mean, as long as you know how to... I mean, you can use this stuff?

DAISY

[Yeah. I reckon I can.

ARCHIVIST

Good.

DAISY

So, do you have a plan?

ARCHIVIST

Um... We're working on it. You think she's found him by now?

DAISY

Maybe. Maybe he's not watching anyway.

ARCHIVIST

I-I just... I feel safer if I think he's distracted. Is the... the rest of it...?

DAISY

Yeah.

ARCHIVIST

And Martin... he's okay with it?

DAISY

It was his idea.

ARCHIVIST

Yeah. You think it'll work?

DAISY

No idea. If you can get me or Basira the— **(She trails off.)**

ARCHIVIST

What?

DAISY

Tape!

ARCHIVIST

Oh, yeah.

[Tape clicks off.]

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Outro]

JONATHAN SIMS

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