

MAG – 070 – The Book of the Dead

Content warnings:

- Body horror
- Graphic injury & violence
- Murder

Discussions of: death, existential dread

Mentions of: blood & gore, suicide, impaling, stabbing, gas explosion, burns, decapitation

SFX: low drone, high pitched tone

[The Magnus Archives Theme - Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill presents: The Magnus Archives. Episode seventy. The Book of the Dead.

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro - Continues]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Masato Murray, regarding an unusual inheritance and the causes thereof. Original Statement given 9th December 2003. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus

Institute, London. Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

I did wonder why he left me anything in the first place. Philip Doah and I always kind of hated each other. You know those friends you have who aren't

really your friends, but you go to the same parties and it's not enough of a thing that you'd actually avoid each other, so everyone just assumes you're friends and you kind of absorb that and even start picturing them there when you think about "your friends" as a group, but deep down you both know you don't actually like each other, it's just that it's actually more effort to not be friends? Well Phil was one of those. He was fine if you were discussing a movie and he was picking apart the dialogue or the casting choices, but whenever he started drinking, he got political, and let's just say he was the sort of guy who thought that minimum wage was a bad idea. I don't have particularly strong opinions myself, but it really wasn't a rant you want to hear when you're four beers in. Especially when you've heard it plenty already. It was like, yeah Phil, we know you got where you are through sheer hard work and determination, and the fact your parents gave you their second house as a 21st birthday present didn't help at all. Asshole. Not that I want to speak ill of the dead.

Anyway, as far as I knew, my distaste for him was always mutual, so it came as a real surprise to learn he'd left me something in his will. I'd love to make some flippant remark and say the only gift I needed was him falling under that train, but truth be told his death actually hit me pretty hard. All of us felt it. I mean, 37 years old. It's an odd time to go. It's not really in the realms of "tragic loss of a young life so full of potential", but it's still a long way from "I guess it was his time". I guess it just hit all of us that we were entering the period of our lives where sometimes people die. Life was no longer a given, and it wouldn't actually be as long as all that before funerals were starting to outnumber the weddings. This was back in February and I'd just turned 34, but it played on my mind. Mortality. I just kept thinking to myself: the moment I die will feel just the same as this one. It's not a thing forever in the future; I will be in that present just as surely as I am in this one. And I will end. I've never been a

religious man, and I always say I take comfort in the idea of a peaceful oblivion but that's a lie. I'm terrified.

The inheritance I received from Phil didn't exactly do anything to calm my mind. It was listed in the inventory as his journal, but looking at it that didn't seem right at all. It was clearly older than 37 years, with the black bookcloth faded and worn away at the corners. For a second I wondered if maybe it was some sort of family journal, passed down between generations, but then leaving it to me made even less sense. I still took it. I mean, what else are you going to do in a situation like that? It was larger than it had looked lying on the table, and heavier, like one of those old family bibles you sometimes see in museums. I did have the decency to wait until the end of proceedings before I carried it home and started to look on the Internet to try and see how much it might be worth.

This was actually the first time I took a proper look at it. I don't know, really, the whole thing felt so surreal that actually examining the thing hadn't quite felt right when they first gave it to me. There wasn't any obvious name on the cover, and I wondered if it might have had a dust wrapper that had been lost, but it seemed far too large for anything like that to fit. Opening it up at the beginning, it seemed to lack a proper title page as well, or any other form of identification. Instead, printed there was a quote, though there wasn't any attribution for it.

It read: "Life is a current which cannot be fought. It is a march with one destination. You cannot cease your step nor move your course to one that skirts the journey's termination."

And below it, in a faded blue ink was a handwritten message:

“You have already read too much.”

I laughed at this. I was starting to think that maybe Phil was finding one final way to be an asshole from beyond the grave. I’d never thought he’d actually had much imagination, but a gruesome practical joke did seem the most likely explanation at that point. So I turned the page to see what was next.

The next page was in Latin, but not printed Latin. It looked handmade, like those old medieval books that monks used to write out. The ornate Gothic script cascaded down the page, rigid and sharp.

Obviously I couldn’t read it. Even if I had the first clue about Latin, which I do not, I could barely make out which letter was which. The next page was similar, and the one after that. It was almost twenty pages before the writing became something close to what I recognised.

It was English, but not like modern English. I’m not sure if it was Old- or Middle- or whatever, but they tried to make me study *The Canterbury Tales* once for English class, and it looked kind of like that. Close enough to real words that you knew it was the same language, but it was spelt all wrong and didn’t actually make much sense when you tried to read it. There were a couple of words that stuck out, though. It seemed to be about someone called Julian, and “Deeth” cropped up a few times, which I assumed was “Death” and even one instance of the word “Homycide”, which I didn’t even know was a word back then.

The next pages were more of the same, though I did gradually get more and more so I could understand it, each was in a very different hand, until it reached the entry on Christopher. This was one of the first with printed type, and like the others, had no real heading or formatting, just a solid block of text

that covered the page. It was an account of the death of somebody named Christopher, which apparently took place in the Year of our Lord Fifteen Ninety-Two. He was dragged through the streets of Norwich by a horse, scraping off a good deal of skin on the jagged, frozen ground. After about ten minutes of leaving this bloody trail, the horse proceeds to stop, turn around and slam its hooves into his head until it caves in. Christopher does not lose consciousness until the third impact. This whole scenario was described in vivid, graphic detail. I felt a bit unwell, reading the account of how it felt for him to hear his own skull breaking.

It soon became clear that all the accounts were similar. Each detailed a death, often violent, always unpleasant. They were in chronological order, with what looked like five to ten years between each one, though sometimes they came much quicker, one after the other. I also started to notice, on some of the pages, a faint scorching around the edges, though it would be some time before my own attempts to burn it proved how resilient it really was.

As it went through the ages, the style and the manners of death updated with it, though no-one found in those pages seemed to die naturally. I wasn't reading them very closely at that point, one gruesome death being very much like another, when I reached the last two pages before the book's contents became blank. The penultimate was for Philip Doah, and the last one, as I'm sure you might have guessed, was for me.

It was hard, reading the book's description of Phil's death. It lingered on his terror as he felt himself falling off the platform, the screech of the train's wheels as they rumbled unstoppably towards him. It said that though his legs were severed and his body crushed, it had taken him almost two minutes to die as he watched his blood flowing out along the rails.

I couldn't believe what I was reading. It was sick. Could someone have put this in the book after his death? Why would they do something like that? Or could it be that Phil's accident had been more deliberate than everyone thought? Maybe it was suicide? But even then, I mean, I respect anyone's right to end their own life, but even if that was the case, writing gory fiction about it beforehand is well beyond anything that Phil was capable of. I didn't know what to do. Should I tell someone? And tell them what? The book was old, and these pages look newer than the old handwritten bits, sure, but they still did look like part of the book. If this was some elaborate hoax or morbid joke, whoever did it had a whole book deliberately written, printed and very convincingly aged just to play it on me, whose only significance was that I kind of didn't like a man who died. None of it made any sense.

Finally, I turned to the last page before they turned blank. It was my death. It was to occur, so it said, in 2014. Eleven years in the future. I was apparently to be walking along an isolated country road in Lancashire, of all places, when a passing car would lose control and run me down. The impact would drive me into the wooded barrier, impaling me on fallen tree branch. The driver was killed in the crash, and no-one else would pass by as I lay there, alone and screaming for help, until my body finally gave up. It was quite particular about how the jagged wood was going to feel as it passed through my torso.

I closed the book and tried to understand what I had just read. It was a joke. It had to be. A sick prank by someone who had clearly hated me far more than I had expected. Phil had decided to kill himself, and had this made to harass me afterwards. It was the only explanation that made any sense. Besides, even if it was somehow true and this thing could genuinely tell the future, my end was still well over a decade away. Too far to be of any immediate worry. I simply

wouldn't go to Lancashire. Maybe ever. Certainly not in 2014. I had no idea what would even cause me to go there in the first place. So I did my best to ignore it. For a while.

It played on my mind, though. I mean, how could it not? So I started to look into some of the other deaths it detailed. Not obsessively, at least not at that point, but I took the time to search online for a few of the names and how they died. It wasn't easy, as the book only ever gave first names, and most of them pre-dated online records by a long time. Eventually, though, I found one. Alexander, so the book claimed, had died in 1983, after his home was broken into. He was stabbed seven times in his bed before his throat was sliced open. The entry went so far as to assure me that the murderer was never identified or caught. Well, after a little bit of digging, I found him. Alexander Willard. It was an article on the history of the small town of Alcester, near Stratford-upon-Avon. It was focused on the darker aspects of the area's history, and detailed the few ghosts that supposedly haunted the area. Tucked at the end of the piece was the mention of a strange unsolved murder that had taken place in 1983, where a local mechanic named Alexander Willard had been killed in his bed. No culprit was ever found, and no motive for the crime was ever determined.

Of course, that didn't prove anything. Not really. Only that whoever had written the book had really done their research. There was nothing to it but a lot of time and energy that had, for some reason, gone towards the sole purpose of scaring me. If it was true, if it was real, and Phil had it in his possession, surely he could have read of his own demise and taken steps to avoid it. I turned back to the page for my own death, the sickening desire to re-

read the details gnawing at me. And that was when everything I thought I knew crumbled. Because the page had changed.

The words were as solid and unmoving as they always had been, but now it told me that I died in London. In 2012. I was apparently renting a flat in Bethnal Green with a faulty gas main. The gas had built up undetected, and when I tried to light the oven to cook a piece of salmon, it exploded and set the whole place alight. I was to be admitted to the Royal London Hospital Emergency Department with third degree burns over seventy percent of my body, where I died nineteen hours later.

My whole body was shaking at this point. I threw the book across the room and left. I walked for hours, no idea in which direction. It wasn't possible. I was losing it. It was the only explanation. But I knew that I was as sane as I ever had been. When did it change? Was it when I turned back to read it again? Or perhaps when I had made the decision to never visit Lancashire? If the book knew the future, then how much did it know me? My decisions and choices were my own, so was it responding to them or simply to the fact that I opened the book again? Perhaps it changed every time I opened it, even if I didn't read the page, every interaction changing my fate, though none, it seemed, made it less horrible.

I went to stay with a friend of mine, John Kendrick, for a few days. He could see something was wrong, and thankfully didn't ask me about it, instead just trying to cheer me up. I tried to forget it, to ignore what I had read but it's not the sort of thing that ever truly leaves your mind, and eventually I found myself back in that lonely house, staring at that damned book. Had it changed? Were the words now within that raggedy black covering already describing a new,

more painful end for me? Or had it shown mercy, and granted me a quicker death?

I tried to destroy it of course. It wouldn't burn and water didn't seem to damage the pages. Spilled ink didn't mark them and, though I considered burying it, I couldn't shake the feeling that those who came before me must have tried all the same things. I read my death again, as it told me how I was to be partially decapitated by a falling piece of masonry on New Years Eve, 2011.

I try not to read it, of course. But sometimes it just gets too much. Every time the date gets closer, and the manner of my death stays just as awful. When I close the book I wonder, are those same words still there, squatting and biding their time, or have they already changed into some new unknown terror that I can neither know nor avoid, waiting to spring on me.

I haven't brought the book with me to show you, and I am not planning to write up a will. I don't know whether it's ownership of the thing that makes it write your fate or just reading it. Either way, I will keep it as long as it will let me. Until I reach an end that may be more gruesome but is fundamentally no different than that which awaits us all.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

Mr Murray disappeared shortly after making this statement. As far as we can determine, it was a voluntary disappearance, as the lease on his flat was cancelled shortly beforehand, and he resigned from his post as an administrator with Birmingham City Council. Since then, he has apparently been successful in changing or hiding his identity, and neither Sasha nor Tim have had any luck locating him, though Tim was able to confirm that one Philip

Doah passed away after falling under a train at Birmingham New Street Station on the 1st of August 2003. There are also no accident reports we were able to find that matched any of his supposed predicted deaths. I've discouraged further attempts to locate Mr Murray, as even the latest of his possible ends was some years ago now, and if he was in any way correct about the book, he is most likely long dead.

Notable in his account, however, is the absence of any indication that this book was ever possessed by Jurgen Leitner. It seems to support the theory that, whatever these books are, Leitner is not entirely responsible for them.

One other slightly encouraging piece of news is apparently IT have finally figured out what's wrong with Sasha's computer – it's been getting authentication errors when attempting to connect with external devices or networks. I can't say I'm fully familiar with exactly what that means, but hopefully now the problem has been isolated, they can come up with some sort of workaround, and future investigations will be able to once again fully utilise her technical skills.

End recording.

[Tape clicks off. Tape clicks on.]

Supplemental.

Books. Again and again it always seems to come back to those books. There are other artifacts that hold sinister power, certainly, but none of them seem to be quite so prevalent or insidious as those damn books. But why? I had always assumed that Leitner had created them somehow, leasing parts of his own damned soul give them power, or some similar nonsense. But no. I've heard

enough now to be sure that these books existed long before he managed to hunt them down. Not all of them, though, it would seem.

I found something in the tunnels. I have now thoroughly explored the upper level, at least as far as I'm able. Further in, some of the passageways are blocked off or ruined by infrastructure works. Pipes and drainage, that sort of thing. It may be that the lower levels would have a route underneath and back up the other side, though I've yet to make much headway down there. But, shortly after I started exploring the second level, I found something. It was a room, empty except for three wooden chairs. It looked like there had previously been more, but they had been smashed. Based on the scorch marks in the corner, I think I know what they were used for. The ashes were old, impossible to tell what they might have been before they were burned, except for the small scraps of old paper dotted around the floor. I think someone tore up a book and then burned it. There was only one scrap large enough to decipher anything legible: "They have for adversaries the Satariel, or concealers, the Demons of absurdity, of intellectual inertia, and of Mystery."

That answers the question of what happened to the copy of The Key of Solomon that Gertrude bought. But if she only bought it to destroy it, why down there? There seemed no especial significance to the room, except that it contained some old wooden furniture. No sign of the other Leitners, though. I'll need to keep looking.

End supplemental.

[The Magnus Archives Theme - Outro]

The Magnus Archives is a podcast distributed by Rusty Quill and licensed under a creative commons attribution, non-commercial share alike 4.0 international license. Today's episode was written by Jonathan Sims and directed by Alexander J Newall.