

MAG – 054 – Still Life

Content Warnings:

- Dead animals
- Taxidermy

Discussions of: death, smoking, scopophobia

Mentions of: paranormal impersonation, breaking and entering

SFX: low drone

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill presents: The Magnus Archives. Episode fifty-four. Still Life.

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro *Continued*]

[Tape clicks on.]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Alexander Scaplehorn regarding his evaluation of The Trophy

Room taxidermists in Barnet. Original statement given June 23rd 2013. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

I try not to judge on appearances. I have a certain sympathy with those who find themselves instinctively reviled by those about them. Not simply because I, myself, am what you might generously describe as odd-looking, but because my career has taken me down the path of working for the Inland Revenue. And you should see the way people recoil from you when they find out you work for the taxman. So I try to have a little bit more depth than that and give everyone a chance. So it was with what could be described as an aggressively open mind that I made my way to undertake an inspection of The Trophy Room, a taxidermist's shop near Woodside Park in Barnet.

I have never been in any way attracted to the idea of taxidermy, aside from a few interesting examples in the Natural History Museum, but I was quite certain it didn't deserve its ghoulish reputation. Of course, I was inspecting it to ensure it wasn't being used for money laundering purposes, so if it turned out it was involved in criminal activity, I would be quite justified in any bad

opinion I might care to indulge, but I didn't want to be premature. You see, The Trophy Room had been a staple of Woodside Park for some 30 years, but like many niche-interest shops, seemed to see little real business.

Its taxes were all in order, but there were very few regular customers and most of the money that kept it in the black came from occasional large transactions that seemed somewhat excessive for the items being purchased – all hallmarks of money laundering. You'd be surprised how many businesses that you pass every day on the street are being used in a similar manner. Those shops that never seem to be open, or who cater to such a specific market you wonder how they can break even, well, often they can't without some illicit assistance.

Now, I'm not the police. I have no power to arrest anyone, revoke any licences or even issue a fine without a good deal of hassle. That all comes later and from other people. My job is just to discuss their compliances and policies to prevent money laundering, and examine their transactions to confirm that they're not too suspect. I find it fascinating, but I am keenly aware that the majority of the people I inspect do not share my opinion.

As soon as I arrived at The Trophy Room, I could tell that it was going to take some time. The shop had that layer of grime that only accumulates after a business has been in place for decades without change. The painted golden

letters were now a dirty brown and the edges of the olive-green awning were streaked with muck. The stuffed tiger in the window was so faded by the sun that I had to do a double take to check it wasn't a lion, so faint were the stripes. Its eyes were glassy and one of its teeth seemed to have broken off. Even so, there was something about the curve of its mouth that drew me in and I got so lost looking at it that I quite jumped when the bell above the door sounded its jarring clang.

I looked up to see a surprisingly young man standing there. I had expected some crusty old gamekeeper type, judging by the look of the place, but instead this fresh-faced 20-something held out his hand for me to shake. I did so. The hand was firm and very dry. I asked him if he was the owner and he said he was, introducing himself as Daniel Rawlings. Apparently, the place had belonged to an old friend of his father's, who didn't have much in the way of family, and when he'd passed away a few years before, Daniel had inherited it. I asked him if he was even interested in taxidermy and he just shrugged and gestured me inside.

The smell hit me as soon as I crossed the threshold. It was so thick you could almost taste it, like something had murdered a lily and it was rotting under the floorboards. Dreadful smell. I turned to see Daniel lighting a cigarette, as if in

acknowledgment of the odour. He just shrugged again and said it was chemicals, casting an eye over the assembled collection of taxidermied wildlife.

It was then I became aware of them: hundreds of glassy, dead eyes staring at me from all directions. A huge moose in front of me; a shelf full of squirrels along the wall; unmoving ravens attached to an old electric chandelier; and dozens and dozens of fish, mounted on plaques or sealed in fake tanks. Fur, feathers, scales... Every manner and type of dead skin surrounded me, each frozen in uncanny stillness, as though they were trapped in a world where time had simply stopped. Everything except their eyes, of course. Their eyes had never been alive, and they all seemed to stare in my direction, so that to look too close at any of them was to gaze into that unseeing glass.

I took a moment to compose myself and tried to remember that I had made a decision to not judge the shop or its owner based on the fact that many consider taxidermy unsettling. I could see myself becoming one of these people and I fought very hard against the feeling of wrongness that seemed to be trying to worm itself into my mind. I forced myself to pay Daniel some vague compliment about the variety of his pieces as he lit another cigarette. I considered mentioning the smoking ban, but that wasn't really why I was there, so I just started talking about money laundering instead. He nodded and said he'd had the letter announcing the inspection and had got all the accounts

and transactions for the past few years ready for me. He explained that, as he'd only taken over the business very recently, he wasn't aware of much in the way of anti-money laundering policies or procedures. This was music to my ears, as there's very little I enjoy more than taking an engaged new business owner through the basics, and in a few minutes, I'd forgotten all the glassy eyes that seemed to follow me round the room. At least mostly.

Daniel seemed remarkably interested when I outlined basic checks and due diligence, but it wasn't the first time. People, especially new business owners, tend to sit up and take notice when HMRC turns up for a visit. I mean, I try not to exploit my position, but people take a visit from the taxman very seriously and it can produce some wonderfully attentive audiences. Daniel didn't seem panicked or worried though, simply intrigued. He asked all the right questions and was always ready with a good example for any of the more abstract aspects of the discussion. All in all, he was a real pleasure to discuss money laundering with.

I'd even stopped noticing the smell after a while, though I'd become aware of it again whenever he started another cigarette, something that usually happened almost immediately after he finished his last one. I can't even imagine what his lungs must have looked like. The only thing that was a touch awkward was that he seemed determined to avoid eye contact, looking at the

floor or the taxidermied animals, but never directly at me. It was a little bit disconcerting, but I have a cousin with autism, so it wasn't an entirely new situation to me.

Eventually the discussion ended and Daniel talked through some of the potential policies he was going to put in place. They actually seemed a bit excessive, given that he was only the person currently employed at The Trophy Room, but I certainly wasn't going to tell him to be less careful. I then asked if I could have a look at his books and he nodded again and took me through to the back room.

The office behind the main shop was small and very clean. Most of the space was taken up by a large oak desk and I could see another door leading through to what seemed to be a workshop, judging by the tables and bags of sawdust. Daniel handed me his account books, bank records and receipts and left me to it. None of it had been digitised and I could tell it was going to take me a long time to get through it all. The smell was fainter here though, so it wasn't quite as dreadful as it might have been.

There was taxidermy in this room as well, though different to the ones out front. Hung along the back walls were pelts and treated animal skins. They looked very old. Some I recognised as Native American or African in origin, and

one seemed so old I was worried to even breathe near it in case it collapsed into dust. On top of the desk, pressed up against the wall, was a mounted hare in a small waistcoat. It reminded me of the white rabbit from Alice in Wonderland, although its fur was faded and now stained a faint yellow. I found its face a bit more unsettling than the others, though I couldn't tell you why, and I tried not to look too closely at it as I went through the shop's records.

It didn't look like there was any money laundering go on, which was a relief. The prices that people were occasionally paying for the stuffed creatures were very high, but I'm by no means an expert on the industry and there didn't seem to be anything else suspicious in the books. I did wonder the sort of people he was selling to though. From the back room, I watched four customers enter over the course of the day. In each case, I watched as they got more and more unnerved, before finally fleeing back out the door, trying to rationalise their fear. I sympathised.

It was almost closing time when Daniel came back to check on me. I gave him the good news; he didn't seem particularly relieved, but told me he was glad to hear it. Then he laughed and asked if I knew how honoured I was. I didn't understand. He told me that I was sat here among some of the oldest skin in the world. That was how he phrased it. It put me a bit on edge and I cast a

nervous glance towards the workshop, before reminding myself that I was keeping an open mind about his strange profession.

Daniel started to go through the pieces on display: buffalo skin from North America; Jaguar from the south; a wonderful pelt from the early Middle Ages. The hare, he said, had been part of the Great Exhibition of 1851 and had helped drive Victorian England mad for the craft. I didn't like the emphasis he put on mad when he said that. Finally, he pointed to the oldest of the pelts. He told me it was gorilla skin from Carthage, brought by Hanno in the 5th century BC, and that it might just be the oldest piece of taxidermy in the world. To be honest, I didn't believe him. Even if a gorilla's hide could be preserved for more than two millennia, it seemed an unlikely thing to be found in the back of a shop in Barnet. It was clearly very old though and I didn't challenge him on it.

I was just about to make my excuses and go, when the bell rang out at the front of the shop and a pair of obnoxious Cockney voices started to call out for Daniel. His face went blank at this and he asked me to excuse him one second, abruptly leaving me in the back room alone. I heard the men say something about unloading a van and then the bell rang again, taking Daniel with it. I was alone.

I was just packing up and making some final notes for my report when I heard something. It was muffled, but definitely seemed to be words. It sounded like it was coming from beneath the floor.

I looked and saw a ring-pull connected to a small door I hadn't noticed, which I assumed led to a basement. The sound came again.

I cast a look into the main shop to see if Daniel had returned, but it was quiet. I knew opening the door was a stupid thing to do. I can't imagine a single scenario where it would have ended well for me, but the whole place was so strange that part of me couldn't resist seeing how deep the rabbit hole went, if you'll pardon the joke. So I opened the door.

It did indeed have a flight of stairs disappearing down into what seemed to be a basement. If there was a light switch, I couldn't see it, and it was impossible to see anything beyond the first dozen steps or so. The light that filtered through from the dim bulb behind me did illuminate one thing though: a face. I couldn't make out any details, but it was pale and swayed ever so slightly from side to side. The body below it was shadowed and hidden, but it seemed to stare up at me as it moved. It spoke, the cadence identical to what I had heard through the wooden door.

"We've got one down here. Come on, I'll show you."

It was so flat, almost mechanical, it felt about as much like genuine speech as the wind flowing through a cracked rock sounds like a flute being played. Which is to say, they may sound identical, but only one of them is made by a living human. I started to say something, to call out, but my voice died in my throat slightly as the face retreated back into the basement.

“We’ve got one down here. Come on, I’ll show you.”

I turned and walked very briskly into the main shop. I was now fully terrified and could feel the cold sweat dripping off my forehead. In the doorway stood Daniel. He asked if I was all right with a smile that made my stomach drop and at last he looked me in the eyes. I recognised the glassy stare. The same eyes that gazed at me from a hundred sawdust filled sockets around the room.

When they all began to move, I nearly broke down. If I had, I have no doubt that I would be dead. Or maybe far worse. Instead, I had a sudden rush of adrenaline and charged into Daniel, knocking him sprawling to the floor in surprise. It was like hitting a sandbag. His two Cockney friends were too slow to grab me before I was off down the road. I may not look like it, but I can move at a fair pace when I need to. And I did so for almost an hour before I finally felt safe enough to stop.

I was very lucky, you know. I had the foresight to gather all my notes before I opened the basement door. It meant I didn't have to return. I could simply write them up a glowing report and never think about it again. Save for giving you my statement, of course. And that's exactly what I did. After all, whatever all that other stuff was, they weren't laundering money.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

It was with some trepidation that I made the discovery that The Trophy Room is still in business and still under the proprietorship of Daniel Rawlings. It's the sort of lead we never get in these cases: still active and available for investigation. However, given the events detailed here, I had some very serious reservations about sending anyone to investigate. I may not entirely trust my assistants, but I won't lose them.

Eventually Sasha volunteered. I warned her it might be dangerous, but she did seem very keen. It turned out to be rather a let-down in the end. Sinister as the taxidermy was, there was apparently no figure in the basement, which Rawlings was happy to let her investigate, nor any obvious weirdness to any other aspect of the shop. Rawlings denies any memory of specifically Cockney delivery men, but I'm sure I don't need to spell out my suspicions there.

There's nothing we can prove, and if he doesn't want to talk, there's precious little we can do to change his mind. He also denies being the Daniel Rawlings who disappeared from Edinburgh in 2006. He allowed Sasha to take a photograph of him and I've been comparing the pictures available for the Daniel Rawlings who disappeared. It's the strangest thing; they're different heights, different builds, different shapes to the face, but their hair is identical. Their eyes, on the other hand, are not, and I find it to hard credit that they could be the same person. (**Sigh**) Another dead end.

End recording.

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Supplemental.

I broke into Gertrude's flat. I was doing some digging when I discovered that her home had not yet been re-let. A quick discussion with the agent confirmed that there were some legal delays due to the manner of her disappearance and death, and she was paid up for the next six months, so they hadn't yet cleared it out. So, I broke in. It wasn't easy and the window meant that I didn't get a lot of time before I heard sirens, but I think I got away with it.

I learned a few things from this. Firstly, Gertrude lived a very minimalist existence. There was nothing in the kitchen except teabags, a pot, a kettle and

a single mug. Her bed was neatly made and she had a single bookshelf filled with an array of volumes, mostly on history. Judging by the bag I found nearby, I think she must have gotten rid of books once she had read them.

She didn't own a television, but I did find something that piqued my interest: a laptop charger. There was no sign of the computer that went with it, but the indication that she might have owned one has inserted itself rather high on my priorities list. Still, her home has given me little information in and of itself, though it continues that to prove that my impressions of Gertrude could hardly have been less accurate. I'm starting to feel like the only correct assumption I made about her was that she probably liked tea.

Oh, and I looked through a handful of books on her shelf. They were very well taken care of, with the exception that any time a person's face was featured on the cover, their eyes had been cut out and very carefully removed.

End supplement.

[Tape clicks off.]

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Today's episode was written by Jonathan Sims and directed by Alexander J Newall.

It featured: Jonathan Sims as The Archivist.