

MAG – 149 – Concrete Jungle

Content Warnings:

- Environmental disaster
- Minor body horror

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill presents: The Magnus Archives. Episode one hundred and forty-nine. Concrete Jungle

[Tape clicks on.]

MARTIN

Martin Blackwood, Assistant to Peter Lukas, Head of the Magnus Institute, recording statement number 0131305, statement of Judith O’Neill, given May 13th 2013.

Statement begins.

MARTIN (STATEMENT)

It’s weird the things that land you a job sometimes. I mean, a first from Corpus Christi, Cambridge, a masters in Biological Sciences – you’d think that would be enough to get a decent science job. But as it turns out, the competition these days is legitimately ridiculous, and trying to get a position based on my academic record seemed to be a complete waste of time. Then I applied to the Anglo Brazilian Amazon Trust, and do you know what actually got me the job? I

had a half blue in modern pentathlon and another in orienteering from my undergrad days. Apparently, most of the science positions were generally applied to by the sort of people who pursued academia specifically to avoid ever having to climb up a hill, and the job required a certain degree of outdoorsmanship. It didn't even matter that I didn't speak Portuguese (well, not back then). It was enough that I had the knowledge, fitness and, most importantly, was willing to basically chuck in my entire life in England with no notice to fly off to Brazil for who knows how long. Strange how things work out sometimes, isn't it?

The job title was technically Ecological Specimen Technician, but working with the ABAT was basically nothing like any lab tech job I'd ever had before. For a start, there wasn't a lab, not really. They'd built this facility just on the edge of the Caracaraí Ecological Station and, from a distance, you'd think it was just this big wooden hut, and it kind of was, just full of incredibly high-tech kit. There was basically no testing done on site, though. Aside from the computers, the visiting researchers used to just make whatever notes or observations, or run whatever models, they needed. Basically, everything on-site was designed for quick storage and processing any specimens for travel. Keeping a lab environment up and running in the middle of the Amazon was never really an option, so most of our job was focused on retrieving whatever they wanted testing and making sure that it got to the actual lab intact, wherever that might have been.

I was part of the facility's permanent staff, and we were generally hired out by corporations or universities who wanted to use our services for some project or piece of research they were conducting. My specific job was to head out into the jungle, usually babysitting some weedy wannabe explorers who

insisted on coming along, and then snag whatever they needed to retrieve. Could be environmental measurements, tree cuttings, water samples and even small animals, though we're not legally allowed to take anything bigger than a frog. It's actually really interesting work, although you do start to get a little bit bored of the same fifty square miles of jungle after you've been doing it for a few years.

And we're very careful to stick to the bits of jungle we've been assigned, as we're right next to the Yanomami Indigenous Territory and accidentally crossing into it ends up being a bit politically complicated, and even pretty dangerous if you cross paths with the wrong group. The Yanomami can get pretty territorial. I mean, I guess you would be too if you had that many companies trying to illegally strip-mine your land. Still, it's not usually a problem. We stay in our area; they stay in theirs. The worst part is the number of dickhead scientists who turn up with the same played-out Cannibal Holocaust jokes. It's like, sure, technically they practice endocannibalism, but it's just the bone-ash of their relatives and loved ones, so, you know, calm down Dr Livingstone, there's no way they'd respect your sweaty ass enough to even consider eating you.

Anyway, I'm getting off topic. I usually head out with the other Specimen Tech, Fernanda Machado, a local. And by local, I mean she's from Manaus, about 200 miles away. Brazil's pretty big. And if there's one thing she's really good on that I'm not, it's the weather. I'm pretty hopeless at figuring out what any given day's going to be like, and just have to rely on whatever weather site I'm currently losing faith in. It doesn't help that the weather in the Amazon is just plain weird, with rains coming out of nowhere months before the winds should actually be bringing in the clouds, and no one knows why. But Fernanda, she

might not know why, but somehow she always knew when, to the point where if she said it might be bad, I would just cancel the expedition, no further evidence needed.

Not that day, though. No, that day we had the world's pushiest climate scientist breathing down our necks. Dr Nikos Anastas. I mean, I'd read his studies and he did good work, sure, but the way he acted, you'd have thought that the oceans were going to drown us all tomorrow if we didn't get out there. And how he talked to us, like ... I mean, Fernanda and I were no strangers to patronising scientists explaining our jobs back to us, but Dr Anastas was a whole other level. He talked to us like we were five-year-olds who'd just asked him what recycling was. Fernanda was certain it was going to rain, but he'd "checked online" and it apparently said it was going to be fine. Besides, he had some real big money backing him, so we couldn't really push the issue. In the end, we went out into the jungle, and even I could tell that the colour of the sky through the canopy was bad news.

Dr Anastas was looking to measure pollutant and plastic levels in some of the nearby rivers. The various ecological protection laws should mean that they had virtually none of either, and he was looking into something to do with pollutant transmission and chemical spread from industrial sites. If it hadn't been for the standard NDAs they were always getting us to sign, I could have already told him the sort of results he was going to get – he wasn't the first to come here for this kind of work – but my hands were tied. If you're wondering, by the way, the answer is pretty damn polluted, largely due to various illegal mining and logging operations and land seizure in the area. The point is, we were barely an hour into the trek, when the skies opened.

The rain came down thick, thick in that way that I've only ever found in the jungle, where there aren't really droplets, it's more like the air just turns to water. Visibility went down to nothing immediately, and I started to talk quickly to Fernanda about whether we could make it back or where we might be able to shelter. The rain was bad, but we'd handled worse and we were perfectly calm. Not so much Dr Anastas, who was clearly panicking. He shouted at us, yelling over the sounds of the rain-soaked jungle that we had to go back, before immediately charging off in the wrong direction.

Obviously, we wanted to leave him to his own stupidity and let the Amazon deal with him, but we both knew that it just wouldn't be worth the paperwork. So, we followed him, trying to slow his pace long enough to let him know that he was going the wrong way, but either he couldn't hear us or, more likely, he wasn't inclined to listen. Finally, I grabbed his arm, pulling him to a stop. He said something I couldn't make out and pulled back, trying to throw off my grip. Clearly, he hadn't considered I'd be the stronger, and when my grip held firm, he unbalanced himself. He shifted his leg, trying to keep his footing, but slipped on the now muddy ground, falling and pulling me with him. I instinctively grabbed Fernanda for support, but ended up pulling her down as well, the three of us tumbling down a short, muddy decline and landing hard in the foliage.

It took a few moments to pull ourselves together. It wasn't a huge fall, but I felt strangely disorientated, as I clambered to my feet, shaking my head in an attempt to dispel some of the fuzziness that had settled over it. The others clearly felt it too, although checking ourselves over it seemed we'd been lucky: all we had broken was our equipment, although Dr Anastas whined about that almost as much as if it had been a bone.

I tried to get my bearings but, even though we'd only moved a few metres laterally at most, I was finding it really hard to get a solid idea on where we were. I couldn't figure out exactly which way we had come, and I couldn't get a clear read on the sun through the canopy and clouds. Fernanda wasn't having any better luck with the compasses, as they were either broken or something magnetic in the area was messing with them. They just gently span around and around. There was at least something resembling a trail, though not one I recognised. Honestly, we should have just waited it out until we were overdue at the facility and they sent out a retrieval team, but that would take almost a full day, and I could see in Dr Anastas' eyes that there was no way he was going to wait that long. So, we picked a direction and started walking the trail.

When I first saw the structures, my instinct was to turn around and go back. From a distance, they looked like shabono, the huge ring of thatched roofs the Yanomami place around their settlements for shelter. It didn't make sense, though. There was no way we'd gone so wildly off course as to end up in the Indigenous Territory, absolutely no way. But there was something else. Something about their construction seemed off, wrong somehow. So much so that when Fernanda grabbed my arm and urgently whispered that we had to leave, I shrugged her off and headed forward for a better look. That was when I noticed how quiet it was. Aside from the rain, the jungle cacophony had simply stopped.

As I got closer to the shabono, it became clear what was wrong with it. Although each roof was thatched like normal, the stands weren't made of leaves, but all kinds of different materials instead: long strands of plastic, shards of rusted metal, even oddly shaped hunks of cement. They wrapped through and around each other like any other thatch, but the texture, the

colour, everything about it was different in a way that made my stomach churn, though I wasn't exactly sure why. None of the materials were organic or natural. I shared a look with Fernanda. She didn't say anything, but she didn't have to. We both knew how isolationist the Yanomami tended to be, how resistant they were to any outside influences. The idea that they would have the desire to build, or even the equipment to build, something like this was ridiculous. So, what did that leave? Had one of the illegal mining operations done it just to antagonise them? Possible, I guess, but it would have been a lot of work for basically no reason. It just didn't make sense.

Dr Anastas, though, didn't know enough about the Yanomami or their buildings to be unsettled, and instead voiced his irritation that we were standing around chatting rather than going for help. He walked around to one of the gaps in the shabono and headed inside. By the time either of us had noticed, he was already inside. Fernanda and I scrambled after him, desperately hoping that we were good enough communicators to be able to convey apologies to whoever was in there.

But the inside was just like the outside, and in the worst possible way. There were no people in there, but that's not the same thing as it being empty. Instead there were ... figures. From a distance, they looked like human beings standing impossibly still, but getting closer quickly revealed the lie. They were just the rough shapes, cobbled together out of a hundred different pieces of garbage: a broken metal clothes horse for a ribcage, a plastic chair leg for an arm, rusted screws for teeth. In some cases, it looked like someone had gone to a lot of effort to match anatomy with construction. I saw one with a broken water cooler where its stomach would be, and another had a pair of old oxygen tanks standing in for lungs. They were completely still, but there was

something about them that made my mouth dry up and my mind scream to run. It didn't feel like they were statues. It felt like they were choosing not to move.

Dr Anastas didn't seem to have the same unease with the situation as me and Fernanda, as he examined and prodded the figures with apparent delight. Maybe he thought avant-garde jungle art was just something that happened out there, I don't know. I never got a chance to ask him, because suddenly he was cooing with delight at something he'd picked up off the ground. The ground, I could now see, was simply a half inch of loose dirt over the top of a massive plastic tarpaulin. He came over to show us his discovery. It was a chunk of concrete that appeared to be the exact size and shape of a tiny pit viper, even down to the detail on its head. The doctor seemed quite taken with it, but Fernanda immediately sensed something was wrong and stepped back, pulling me with her.

What happened then was almost too quick for me to properly follow. The lifeless concrete viper spun around, opened its mouth, and bit Dr Anastas on the wrist. He screamed, but only for a second, because after that his throat was full. He started convulsing, as grey, liquid concrete began to pour from his mouth, from his nose and his eyes. His limbs went rigid and I could see his body starting to swell with it. I don't know if it was me or Fernanda screaming, maybe it was both of us, but I know it was her that first spotted that the detritus figures were no longer choosing to stand still. That was the last I ever saw of Dr Nikos Anastas. There was never any question of trying to save him.

I don't know how long we ran, but it was hours before we felt even remotely safe. The jungle looked normal again, and more importantly, it sounded normal. We tried to talk about what we'd seen, but after confirming we'd both

witnessed the same thing, we realised we didn't actually have anything to say about it, just this white hot fear that still hasn't completely gone away.

In the end, we crossed paths with a group of real Yanomami tribesmen. They were really friendly and, once they figured out that we were lost, they were very happy to return us to a part of the jungle we knew, near our facility. Of course, we didn't have a good explanation for what happened to Dr Anastas, so we lost our jobs pretty much immediately. But you know what? That's fine. I'm done with the jungle. There's something in there, and I don't know which scares me more: the thought that it's more than just the things we left behind; or that that's all it is, and we can't escape the ruins of our own future.

MARTIN

Statement ends.

There's, um, a note here as well. Looks like Gertrude's handwriting? Start of a letter to Dekker, thanking him for sending Judith to her, though it doesn't look like it was ever finished or sent. I assume this is another one he was trying to use to prove the Extinction. It certainly has something in it. Mankind's trash giving rise to something terrible. Then again, fear of the other, inanimate humanoid figures... That's all very Stranger, isn't it?

It's never simple, is it?

Sort of surprised Peter hasn't rocked up with some more "insights". Haven't seen him around for a while, actually. I mean, it's not like I miss him, but at least he was someone to— Ah. Yeah, that makes sense. Alright, fine, just me on my lonesome for a while, then. Could be worse. Peaceful, at least. I don't miss all the shouting, even if it were— Wait ...

(Calls) Excuse me! Excuse me, this area is off-limits to the public!

GEORGIE

(Distant) Sorry?

MARTIN

You can't be here; it's not allowed.

[Footsteps and voice gets louder as approaches]

GEORGIE

Oh, sorry. Um, Melanie told me to wait for her here?

MARTIN

Oh, you're here for Melanie?

GEORGIE

Yeah. Georgie.

MARTIN

Sorry. Sorry, I didn't realise. I'm sure she's around here somewhere.

GEORGIE

You must be Martin.

MARTIN

Yeah. Has Melanie been talking about me?

GEORGIE

Oh, um... John used to go on about you a lot.

MARTIN

Oh. Wait, I thought Melanie-Georgie and John-Georgie were...?

GEORGIE

Oh, uh, same Georgie.

MARTIN

Oh. Ah. So, you and John...

GEORGIE

Aren't really talking anymore.

MARTIN

Right.

...

Why not?

GEORGIE

Excuse me?

MARTIN

Why aren't you talking?

GEORGIE

Oh... Because I think he's going to destroy himself and anyone who lets him get too close. And I don't want that to include me. Or Melanie.

MARTIN

Maybe he just needs some help.

GEORGIE

I did help him, as much as I safely could, but he just carried on anyway—

MARTIN

Yeah, he'll do that ...

GEORGIE

—and I realised if I kept trying it was going to hurt me more than I was willing to accept.

MARTIN

Well, sometimes helping people hurts.

GEORGIE

Sure, but that doesn't mean everything painful helps. Sometimes people have problems that will wreck you long before you can make a dent in them. And some people don't want help; they just want other people suffering with them.

MARTIN

John doesn't want that.

GEORGIE

He doesn't know what he wants. And from the sound of things, he's run out of time to figure it out.

MARTIN

It's easy to pass judgement from the outside.

GEORGIE

One more reason to stay on the outside.

MARTIN

A-a-and wh-what, you think Melanie's worth saving?

GEORGIE

It's not about worth, but yeah, she's actually trying to get well, so I'm going to help her.

MARTIN

This place isn't a sickness.

GEORGIE

No, I think it's worse.

MARTIN

Look, we're all just trying to do the right thing.

GEORGIE

Maybe. Look, life forces you to make hard decisions, but I can never trust someone who goes around looking for hard decisions to make.

MARTIN

And what do you mean by that?

GEORGIE

Jumping on a grenade is only heroic if you weren't the one who actually threw it.

MARTIN

That's not what's happening.

GEORGIE

Okay. It's still not something I want any part of.

MARTIN

Well, lucky for you, we're fully staffed, so—

MELANIE

Hey, you ready?

GEORGIE

Oh, yeah, whenever you are.

MELANIE

Who were you talking to?

GEORGIE

Oh, I was, um...

...

Huh. No-one, apparently.

MELANIE

Yeah, this place will do that to you. Come on.

GEORGIE

Sure.

[Tape clicks off.]

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Outro]

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

It featured: Alexander J Newall as Martin Blackwood, Sasha Sienna as Georgie Barker, and Lydia Nicholas as Melanie King.