

## **MAG002 – Case 9982211 – “Do Not Open”**

### **ARCHIVIST**

Statement of Joshua Gillespie, regarding his time in possession of an apparently empty wooden casket. Original statement given November 22<sup>nd</sup> 1998. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

### **ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)**

It started when I was in Amsterdam for a holiday with a few of my friends. Everything you're thinking right now, you're right. We were all early twenties, just graduated and decided to spend a couple of weeks going crazy on the continent, so you can almost certainly fill in all the blanks yourself. There were very few points where I'd say that I was entirely sober and even fewer where I

acted like it, though I wasn't quite as bad as some of my friends who had a hard time handling themselves at times. This may have been why I headed out alone that morning – no idea of the exact date but it was sometime in mid-May. The others were sleeping off their assorted hangovers and I decided to head out into the beautiful sunshine of that Netherlands morning and take a walk. Before graduating from Cardiff with the others, I had been studying Architecture, so was looking forward to spending a few hours by myself to wander, and really take in the buildings of central Amsterdam. I was not disappointed – it's a beautiful city, but I realised too late that I hadn't taken any map or guidebook with me, and an hour or two later I was thoroughly lost.

I wasn't particularly worried, as it was still mid-afternoon at this point, and getting lost in the backstreets had kind of been what I was trying to

do, but I still decided I'd better make an actual effort to find my way back to where my friends and I were staying off Elandsstraat. I managed it eventually, but my inability to speak Dutch meant I spent a good hour riding the wrong way on the various trams. By the time I got back to Elandsstraat it was starting to get dark and I was feeling quite stressed, so I decided to pop into one of the cafés to relax before joining up with my friends. I couldn't say for sure exactly how long I was in there, but I do know it had gotten fully dark by the time I noticed I wasn't sat at my table alone. I've tried to describe the man who now sat opposite me many times, but it's difficult. He was short, very short, and felt like he had an odd density to him. His hair was brownish, I think, cut quite short, and he was clean shaven. His face and dress was utterly unremarkable, and the more I try to think of exactly what he looked like, the

harder it is to picture him clearly. To be honest, though, I'm inclined to blame that on the drugs.

The man introduced himself as John, and asked how I was. I replied as best I could, and he nodded, saying he also was an Englishman inside a foreign land. I remember he used that exact phrase because it struck me at the time as very odd. He said he was from Liverpool, though I don't recall him having any sort of accent, and that he was looking for a friend who he could rely on for a favour.

Now, high as I was, I got suspicious as soon as he said that last part and I started to shake my head. John said it was nothing too onerous, just looking after a package for him until he had some friends pick it up, and that he would pay well. I thought he was talking about smuggling, and was about to refuse again when he reached into his... jacket, I

think? and pulled out an envelope. Inside was £10,000. I know; I counted it. I knew it was a stupid move but I kept remembering my friend Richard telling me how easy it had been to get a pound of hash through customs on his first trip to Holland, and holding that much cash in my hands... I said yes. John smiled, thanked me, and said that he would be in touch. He left the coffee shop and I immediately started panicking about what I had agreed to. I wanted to chase after him and return the money, but something weighed me down, kept me locked into my seat. I just sat there for a long time.

I don't remember much about the next few days except worrying about when I'd see John again. I was careful not to spend any of the money he'd given me, and had decided to return it as soon as he turned up. I'd say I had made a mistake and couldn't take his money or look after anything

from him. I tried to enjoy myself, but it was like this shadow hanging over me, and I couldn't stop thinking about it. I waited for days, right up until the end of our trip, but he never showed up. I obsessively checked my suitcase before boarding the plane home, just in case someone had snuck something into it, but there was nothing new in there. I flew back to England with my friends still high and £10,000 tucked into my coat pocket. It was surreal.

It wasn't until almost a year later that I felt confident enough to actually spend any of the money. I'd moved down to work for a small architects' firm in Bournemouth on the south coast. It was an entry level job and the pay wasn't great, but it was the only offer I got in my chosen field, so I moved down there with the hopes of getting some experience and a better position in a year or two. Bournemouth was a decent-size

seaside town, though much less idyllic than I'd assumed it would have been, but rents for a place on my own were a little bit out of my price range, given my starting pay grade. I didn't know anyone else down there, and wasn't keen to share my space with strangers, so I decided to use some of the money I'd been given in Amsterdam the previous year. I reasoned they were unlikely to find me at this stage – I'd not given John any of my details when he spoke to me, not even my name, and if they hadn't been able to find me over the course of the last year, it was doubtful they'd be able to track me here. Also, if it had been drug smuggling, as I suspected, £10,000 probably wasn't so much money to them that they'd track me this far over it. Also, and looking back this sounds stupid, but I'd just grown a beard and thought it would be hard for anyone to recognise me as the same guy. So I spent a bit of John's money on renting a nice one-bedroom flat

in the Triangle, near the town centre, and moved in almost immediately.

About a week later, I was in my kitchen cutting up some fruit for breakfast, and I heard the doorbell ring. I answered it to see two red-faced delivery men. Between them they carried an immense package, which they'd clearly had to manoeuvre up the narrow stairs of the building I lived in. They asked if I was Joshua Gillespie, and when I said yes they said they had a delivery addressed to me and pushed past into the hall. They didn't seem to be from any delivery company I knew and they weren't wearing any uniforms. I tried to ask them some questions, but as soon as they'd placed the box on the floor, they turned around and walked out. They were both well over six feet tall and very imposing, so there was little I could have done to stop them leaving

even if I'd wanted to. The door slammed behind them, and I was left alone with this package.

It was about two metres long, maybe one metre wide and roughly the same deep. It was sealed with parcel tape and written on the top was my name and address in thick curving letters but there was no return address or postmark of any sort. I was starting to risk being late for work at this point, but I decided I couldn't bring myself to leave without seeing what was inside, so I fetched the knife from my kitchen counter and cut the tape keeping the box closed.

Inside was a coffin. I don't know what I expected but it wasn't that. My knife fell to the floor and I just stared at it in mute surprise. It was made of unvarnished, pale yellow wood and had a thick metal chain wrapped around it, which was closed at the top with a heavy iron padlock. The lock was

closed but had the key sitting inside it. I started to reach for it, when I noticed two other things on the coffin lid. The first was a piece of paper, folded in half and tucked under the chain, which I took. The other was the presence of three words, scratched deep into the wood of the casket in letters three inches high. They read: DO NOT OPEN.

I withdrew my hand from the padlock slowly, unsure what I was supposed to do. At some point I must have sat down, as I found myself on the floor, propped up against the wall, staring at this bizarre thing that had inexplicably turned up at my home. I remembered the piece of paper at this point and unfolded it, but it simply read "Delivered with gratitude – J". Strange as it sounds, it was only then I made the connection with the man I'd met in Amsterdam. He'd told me wanted someone to look after a package for a

while. Was this the package he was talking about? Was I to be looking after a corpse? Who was coming to pick it up? When?

I called in sick to work, and just sat there, watching the coffin for what might have been minutes or might have been hours. I just had no idea what to do. Eventually I steeled myself and moved towards it, until my face was just inches away from the lid. I took a deep breath, trying to see if I could smell anything from inside. Nothing. If there was a dead body in there, it hadn't started to smell yet. Not that I really knew what a dead body smelled like. It was early summer at this point, which would mean they must have died recently. If there was a body in there at all. As I got up, my hand brushed the wood of the coffin and I realised it was warm. Very warm, like it had been lying in the sun for hours. Something about

it made my flesh crawl slightly and I withdrew my hand quickly.

I decided to make a cup of tea. It was something of a relief, standing next to the kettle, as from that angle I couldn't see the thing out in the hall. I could just ignore it. I didn't move even after I'd filled my mug; I just stood there sipping my tea, not even noticing that it was still far too hot to drink comfortably. When I finally got the nerve to step back out into the hall, the coffin still lay there, unmoving.

I finally made a decision and, firmly gripping the padlock, I removed the key, and placed it on the hall table next to the door. I then took hold of the coffin and chain and started to pull it further into my flat. It was weird to touch it: the wood still had that unsettling warmth to it, but the chain was as cold as you'd expect from a thick piece of

iron, and apparently hadn't taken on any of the heat. I didn't have any cupboards with enough space to hold the thing, so in the end I just dragged it into my living room and pushed it up against the wall, as out of the way as possible. I cut up the cardboard box it had been sealed in and put it with the rubbish outside. And just like that I had, apparently, started storing a coffin in my home.

At the time I think I assumed it was full of drugs, at least as far as I assumed anything about the situation. Why anyone would store something in such a noticeable way or with a total stranger like me, these weren't questions I could even guess at an answer to, but I decided it was best to think about it as little as possible. For the next few days I avoided my living room, as I found being so close to the thing made me nervous. I was also staying alert for the smell of any sort of rot, which

might indicate there was something dead inside the coffin after all. I never smelled anything, though, and as the days passed I found myself noticing my mysterious charge less and less.

About a week after it arrived, I finally started using my living room again. I'd watch TV, mostly, and keep half an eye on the unmoving casket. At one point I got so cocky as to actually use it as a table. I was drinking a glass of orange juice at the time and absent-mindedly placed it on top of the lid, not really realising exactly what I had done. At least not until I heard movement from underneath it. I froze, listening intently and staring, willing myself to have been imagining things. But then it came again – a soft but insistent scratching, just below where I had placed my glass. It was slow and deliberate and caused gently ripples to spread across the surface of my juice.

Needless to say I was terrified. More than that, I was confused. The coffin had been lying in my living room, chained and unmoving, for well over a week at this point. If there had been anything living in there when it was delivered, it seemed unlikely it would still be alive. And why hadn't it made any sound before if there was something in there capable of movement? I gently picked up my glass and immediately the scratching stopped. I waited for some time, considering my options, before I placed it back down on the other end of the lid. It took about four seconds for the scratching to start up again, now more insistently. When I took the glass away this time, it didn't stop for another five minutes. I decided against doing any further experiments, and instead made the very deliberate decision to ignore it. I felt at that point I either needed to use the heavy iron key to open it and see for myself what was in there, or follow the gouged instruction and resolve

myself to never look inside. Some might call me a coward, but I decided on the latter, that I would interact with it as little as possible while it lived in my house. Well, I guess lived may be the wrong term.

I knew I'd made the right decision the next time it rained, and I heard the box begin to moan. It was a Saturday, and I was spending the day staying in and doing some light reading. I had few friends in Bournemouth, something about having a mysterious coffin lying in my living room made me reluctant to make the sort of connections that might lead to people coming round, and so I spent most of my free time alone. I didn't watch a lot of television even before my living room was taken over with storing this thing, and so I now found myself sat in my room reading quite a lot. I remember I had just started Michael Crichton's *The Lost World* at the time, and it started raining

outside. It was a hard, heavy rain, the sort that falls straight down with no wind to disturb it, until everything is dark and wet. It was barely past midday, but I remember the sky was so overcast and gloomy that I had to get up to turn on the light. And that was when I heard it.

It was a low, gentle sound. I've seen *Dawn of the Dead*, I know what the groans of the undead are meant to sound like, but it wasn't that at all. It was almost... melodious. It sounded almost like singing, if it was muffled by twenty feet of hard-packed soil. At first I thought it might have been coming from one of the other flats in my building, but as it went on, and the hairs on my arms began to stand on end I knew, I just *knew*, where it was coming from. I walked to the living room and stood in the doorway, watching as the sealed wooden box continued to moan its soft, musical sound out at the rain. There was nothing to be

done, I'd made my decision not to open it, and this certainly did *not* make me want to reconsider that. So I just went back to my bedroom, put on some music and turned it up loud enough to drown out the sounds.

And so it continued for a few months. Whatever was in the casket would scratch at anything placed on top of it and moan whenever it rained, and that was that. I suppose it goes to show that you can get used to anything if you have to, no matter how bizarre. I occasionally considered trying to get rid of it, or finding people like you guys to investigate, but in the end I decided that I was actually more afraid of whoever was responsible for entrusting me with the coffin than I was of the actual coffin itself. So I kept it secret.

The only thing that worried me was sleeping. I think it gave me bad dreams. I don't remember

my dreams, never have, and if I was getting nightmares, they were no different – I didn't remember them and I certainly don't now. But I know I kept waking up in a panic, clutching at my throat and struggling to breathe. I also started sleepwalking. The first time that happened it was the cold that woke me up. It was the middle of winter and I tend not to keep the heating on when I'm asleep. It took me a few seconds to fully process where I was. I was standing in the dark, in my living room, over the coffin. What concerned me more about the situation was the fact that, when I awoke, I seemed to be holding the key to it in my hand.

Obviously this worried me. I even went to my GP about it, who referred me to the sleep clinic at the nearby hospital, but the problems never recurred in a clinical setting. I decided to hide the key in more and more difficult to access places, but still I

kept waking up with it, and I was starting to panic. When I awoke one morning to find I'd actually placed the key within the lock and was, as far as I could tell, moments from opening it, I knew I had to find a solution. In the end what I took to doing was perhaps a bit elaborate, but it seemed to work: I would place the key within a bowl of water and then put it in the freezer, encasing it in a solid block of ice. I still sometimes found myself trying to get to the key in my sleep, but the chill of the ice always woke me up long before I could do anything with it. And in the end it just became yet another part of my routine.

I lived like that for almost a year and a half. It's funny how fear can just become as routine as hunger – at a certain point I just accepted it. My first clue that my time keeping the coffin was coming to an end was when it began to rain and there was silence. I didn't notice at first, as my

habit at that point had been to put on the music as soon as the weather began to turn, but after a few minutes I realised that there wasn't anything to drown out. I turned off my music and went to check. The living room was silent. Then came a knock at the door. The sound was light and unobtrusive but it rang out like thunder in the quiet flat. I knew what I'd see as soon as I opened the door and I was right. John and the two delivery men stood there. I wasn't surprised to see them, as I say, but they actually seemed quite surprised to see me. John had to take a second to look me up and down, almost in disbelief, as I asked if they'd come to collect their coffin.

He said that they had, and he hoped it hadn't been too much trouble. I told him where he could stick it and he didn't seem to have an answer for that. He did seem genuinely impressed, however, when I got the key out of the freezer. I didn't

even try to thaw it – I was so eager to have this thing out of my life that I just dropped the bowl of ice on the floor and shattered it. I watched as John picked the icy key off the floor and I told them it was in the living room. I didn't follow them. I didn't want to see what they did with the coffin. I didn't want to see if they opened it. And when the screaming started, I didn't want to see who was screaming or why. I only left the kitchen when the two delivery men carried the coffin past the door. I followed them down the stairs, and watched in the pouring rain as they locked it into a small van marked "Breekon and Hope deliveries". Then they drove away. There was no sign of John.

That was the last I heard of it. I got a new job and moved to London shortly afterwards, and now I just try not to think about it too much.

## ARCHIVIST

Statement ends

It's always nice to hear that my hometown is not entirely devoid of odd occurrences and eerie stories. Ice cream, beaches and boredom are all very well, but I'm glad to hear Bournemouth has at least a few apparitions to call its own. That said, the fact is Mr Gillespie's statement starts with drug use and continues on with the lack of corroborating witnesses being a central theme, which means that an eerie story is all that it is. When the Institute first investigated, it doesn't look like they were able to find a single piece of evidence to support the existence of this scratched coffin, and to be honest I didn't think it was worth wasting anyone's time over now, nearly twenty years later.

That said, I did mention it to Tim yesterday, and apparently he did some digging of his own.

Breekon and Hope did, in fact, exist, and were a courier service that operated until 2009, when they went into liquidation. They were based in Nottingham, however, significantly north of Bournemouth, and if they kept records of their deliveries, they are no longer available.

What is interesting, however, is the address Mr. Gillespie provided for the flat this all took place in. The housing association that ran it does keep extensive records on the tenants that have lived in their buildings going back some forty or fifty years. From what Tim could find, it appears that for the two years of his residence, Mr Gillespie was the only person living in that entire building, with the other seven flats being utterly vacant. Nobody moved in following his departure, and the building was sold to a developer and demolished shortly

after this statement was originally given.

Predictably, no-one who worked for that housing association in the 90s is still there, and despite Tim's best efforts, we could get no explanation for why, in a building of that size, Mr Gillespie spent almost two years living alone, save for an old wooden coffin.

Recording ends.