

MAG008 – Case 0071304 – “Burned Out”

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Ivo Lensik, regarding his experiences during construction of a house on Hill Top Road, Oxford. Original statement given March 13th 2007. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

I've worked in construction for almost twenty years now, mostly in and around the Oxford area. When my father passed away in 1996, I took over his contracting business and have been working steadily ever since.

I can do most anything I'm called on for but generally specialise in new builds, plumbing and wiring work specifically, and I've got something of a reputation for

being available at short notice, so it's not unusual for me to be called in part-way through a build to do some work. When I got the job working on a house down Hill Top Road in mid-November, nothing about the situation seemed strange to me. The guy they had doing the wiring had been called for jury duty and they'd lost him for a couple of weeks, so they asked me to step in. I was on another job during the day, but my fiancée Sam was at a conference in Hamburg for a while and we were saving up for the wedding, so I figured I could do it in the evenings.

Now, Hill Top Road is quite a secluded street around the Cowley area. There aren't many student houses on it, so it's actually quite a peaceful place, especially after all the kids living there have gone to bed. The house itself had only recently been started, as some dispute over ownership had kept the land locked for years, and when I turned up it was still mostly empty. It had two floors with a loft that was going to be another bedroom, to match the rest of the road.

The doors had been fitted, although the locks had not, but the empty spaces where the windows were due to be still stood vacant, letting in the chill. That side of the road backed on to South Park with fences marking the bottom of each garden. The garden of this particular house was mostly full of building materials and debris, but I remember that standing over it all was a tree. It was very large and very dead and not to put too fine a point on it, the thing creeped me right the hell out. It seemed to cast odd shadows, which were dark and clear on even the most overcast of days.

But it wasn't the tree that started it, though. No, that happened my third night on the job. It must have been 8 or 9 in the evening, as it had been dark for a couple of hours. I was working on the ground floor wiring when I heard a knock at the front door. At first I thought it must have been one of the other builders who had forgotten something, but then I realised that there was no lock on the door; any of

the others would have known that and just come right it. I began to feel slightly uneasy, when the knock came again. Over the years I've had a few altercations with punks that wanted to cause trouble on my sites, so I picked up a hammer as I approached. I did my best to hold it casually, as though I'd just been using it.

I opened the door to see an unassuming man in a tan coat. He was quite young, white, maybe mid-twenties, clean-shaven with shaggy, chestnut brown hair. His coat was quite an old cut; it seemed to me he looked like something out of an old Polaroid. He said his name was Raymond Fielding and that he owned the house. As he spoke, I felt my grip on the hammer tightening although I have no idea why. I asked him if he had any ID or documents and he handed over to me what seemed, as far as I could tell, to be the deed to the house, as well as the land beneath, and did indeed list a man named Raymond Fielding as the owner. So I let him in.

I apologised for the draught and said the window panes were being put in over the next few days but until then it was going to be cold. He didn't respond, just walked over to the empty frame of the back window and stared out into the garden. I tried to get on with my work, keeping one eye on this stranger. Nothing about the situation felt quite right, but he didn't seem to be doing anything suspicious, just standings there, looking into the garden. So I returned my concentration to the wiring.

After a minute or two, I became conscious of a sharp, unpleasant smell. I thought maybe I had wired something up wrong, but no, it smelled like burning human hair. I looked over to where Raymond had been standing but he was gone. Where he had been there was just a patch of scorched wooden floor, still apparently smouldering and giving off that dreadful stink. I ran to get the fire extinguisher from an

adjoining room. I was gone only a few seconds but when I returned the smell was gone and there was no longer any smoke or fire, just the burn mark on the wooden floor in front of that window. Touching it, I found that it was just as cold as the rest of the floor. I started to clean and found that the wood below appeared to be undamaged with just a coating of soot and ashes on top. I had a look around for this Raymond Fielding but if he was ever truly there, then he was gone now. It was only when I had finished cleaning up the mark that the true strangeness of the situation began to sink in and I started to panic.

I should probably explain my fear a bit, as it wasn't because of ghosts or phantom smells or anything like that. You see, there is quite a significant history of schizophrenia among the men in my family. My father had it, as did my great uncle, and in both of their cases it led to suicide. I didn't know much about my great uncle but I had seen my father's decline first hand. It had started shortly after his divorce

from my mother, although thinking about it; it was perhaps the early stages that had exacerbated the problems in their marriage. Regardless, he began to spend a lot of time locked in his study doing "his work". I was maybe 24 or 25 at the time and still living at home. I was working with my dad, doing much the same job as I do now, and it was at this point I had to take on more and more of the actual running of the business, since my father was beginning to prioritise his "work" over his actual job. His "work" turned out to be fractals. He became obsessed with them, seemed to spend all of his time drawing them, staring at them, measuring the patterns they created. He would talk to me for hours about the maths behind them and tell me that he was on the verge of a great truth. He was going to shake mathematics to its foundations once he figured out this truth, hidden in those cascading fractal patterns.

One day I returned home to find my father staring through the blinds in terror. He claimed that someone

was following him, told me that they were planning to stop his work. I asked him who it was but he shook his head violently and said I'd know him when I saw him because "all the bones are in his hands". I tried to get him help, of course I did, but he refused to take any medication as he said it interfered with his work, and he wasn't dangerous so I couldn't have him committed. I knew it was only a matter of time before he hurt himself and sure enough the day came when he wouldn't answer the knocks on his study door. I broke in to find him lying dead in a pool of blood, with deep gouges along his wrists and arms. The walls were covered in fractal drawings, every surface was piled high with them and pencil shavings littered the floor. The inquest ruled his death a suicide, although the coroner wasn't able to identify the tool that had made the cuts on his arms or why he had such a look of fear on his face.

This is why the apparent disappearance of Raymond Fielding worried me so much. I was younger than my

father had been but still had that possibility within me. This train of thought was likely why I wasn't paying as much attention as I should have been where I was stepping and I slipped on the wet section of flooring that I had just cleaned. I fell forward, hitting my head badly. I don't think I was unconscious for more than a few seconds but when I woke up I was bleeding from a deep cut on my temple. I tried to make it to my car but I was so dizzy just standing up that it was clear driving was out of the question. So I called for an ambulance. It arrived quickly and it took me to the John Radcliffe Hospital.

When I got there, they were very responsive and quickly determined that I had quite a severe concussion, so I was kept overnight for observation. I told my doctor everything about my encounter with Raymond Fielding. If it was early signs of any developing schizophrenia, I wanted to know as soon as possible. The doctor listened closely and said it was

unlikely, as it would be surprising if I developed full hallucinations so abruptly, but that they were keeping me under observation. I noticed as I was explaining my experience, the nurse taking my blood pressure seemed to be listening intently, though she left before I could ask her why.

I stayed in that hospital for another two days. Sam wanted to cut short her trip when she heard about my concussion, but I told her that any real danger had passed and I should be fine until the end of her conference, so I was mostly on my own for that time. It was the morning before she was due to return that I saw the nurse again. I'd just had the news that the tests had all come back fine, so I was being discharged and she came in to give me a final check.

She asked me if I was sure the man who had come to the house on Hill Top Road had called himself Raymond Fielding. I told her yes, and that I'd even

seen his signature on the deed to the land, but that I didn't know any of the history of the place. She got very quiet and sat down. This nurse was an older woman, Malaysian I think and I would have guessed in her fifties, though I didn't ask. She said her family had lived on Hill Top Road for a long time now and she knew the place I was working. In the 1960s, the house that had stood there had belonged to a man named Raymond Fielding. He was a devout churchgoer and had used it as a halfway house on behalf of the local diocese, looking after teenage runaways and young people with mental problems. The neighbourhood apparently hadn't liked it, as its residents often got into trouble and Hill Top Road had started to get something of a reputation for it. Nobody ever said a word against Raymond himself though, who was by all accounts such a kind and gentle soul as to be almost universally beloved.

Nobody was sure exactly when Agnes moved in; some even said she was Raymond's actual daughter, as the

two of them looked something alike and she was younger than most of the other kids living there. She couldn't have been more than eleven when she turned up and didn't really talk, other than to tell people her name if asked. Everyone just started to notice this child with mousey brown pigtails staring at them through the windows of Raymond's house. As far as anyone could tell that's all she ever seemed to do – stare at people from the windows. It was unsettling but no-one had any real problem with it.

Over the next few years, the kids at the halfway house stopped causing problems in the area around Hill Top Road. It wasn't an obvious change, but gradually the people living there were seen less and less. Raymond was still there and still seemed perfectly cheery. If anyone asked him about a resident who hadn't been around for a while, he'd explain that they'd moved on or found a place of their own, and no-one really cared enough to follow up on his information. Soon the only people living in that

old house were Agnes and Raymond. Then Raymond disappeared as well. Agnes must have been 18 or 19 by this point, and still hardly ever talked. When she was questioned about what happened to Raymond she simply said he had gone away and that the house was hers. People got a bit worried at that, and the police conducted a small investigation, but the house had been legally signed over to Agnes and there was no sign of any foul play. No sign of Raymond either, for that matter.

And so the years passed and Agnes lived on in that old house. Hardly ever seemed to leave it, just watched from the windows. Folks in Hill Top Road learned it was best not to keep pets, as they tended to vanish. Then, in 1974, Henry White goes missing. Five years old and the search turned up nothing. People have always whispered about Agnes but now the whispers got nasty. Nasty enough that when smoke is seen pouring out of the old Fielding house a week after little Henry disappeared, no-one did a

thing. No-one phoned the fire brigade or tried to help. They just watched. Agnes must not have phoned for assistance either, as by the time the fire trucks arrived there was nothing left to save.

Through it all, nobody saw any sign of life from within the building. No screaming, no movement, nothing but the roaring of the flames. When the fire was finally put out, they did find human remains but it wasn't Agnes nor was it Henry White. The only body they found was that of Raymond Fielding. All that was left was a badly-charred skeleton, missing its right hand.

That was the history of the place, as the nurse told it to me. Once the rubble had been cleared away, the land had become tied up in legal complications relating to the ownership and had remained so until earlier last year. She asked me not to let anyone else know she'd been talking about it, as she didn't want people to think she had been spreading stories. I told her I'd keep quiet and she left. I didn't see her again

and was discharged soon afterwards.

I rested at home for a couple of days but I find forced inactivity very boring and my head was feeling fine so I decided to go back to work. By all rights I should probably have avoided returning to Hill Top Road, but I found myself resenting how the house made me feel. I didn't believe in ghosts, to be honest I'm still not sure I do, and had been assured by the doctor that I wasn't displaying any other symptoms of schizophrenia, so there was no reason for me to feel this gnawing apprehension. I convinced myself that the only way to banish the feeling was to return and finish the job that I started. So that's what I did, although I was careful to work only in daylight now and tried to avoid being alone.

Even so, there were occasional moments when I would find myself the only one working in a room, or when silence fell across the building. And then I

would smell it again, that whiff of burnt hair, or catch a glimpse of brown pigtails disappearing around a corner. As the job drew towards a close, it became harder to avoid working there after dark, until I lost track of time completely one afternoon and looked up to see that not only had night fallen but I was the only one left in the building. Almost as soon as I realised this I began to sweat. At first I thought it was nerves or even a panic attack at finding myself alone, but it was the heat; this warmth that seemed to start in my bones and radiate out through me. I took off my hat and jacket, but I just got hotter and hotter until it felt like I was cooking from the inside. I tried to scream but I couldn't find my breath, I couldn't move. I was burning up.

There was a knock at the door and the feeling abruptly vanished. I was cold again, lying on the bare floor. I struggled to my feet as the knock came again. My hand shook as I opened it. By now I didn't know what to expect. Would it be Raymond again? Agnes?

Or some other thing to announce the end of my sanity. What I did not expect was a Catholic priest. He was short, and a bit portly, with close-cropped hair and deep smile lines around his mouth. He introduced himself as Father Edwin Burroughs and told me that "Annie" had asked him to pay the place a visit. I didn't know any Annie and told him so, and he seemed slightly confused, said she worked as a nurse at the John Radcliffe Hospital. This allayed my fears enough that I let him in, and I asked him if he was some sort of exorcist. Father Burroughs smiled and told me yes, that's exactly what he was.

So I told him my story as he went around examining the house. He nodded as I went through what happened, occasionally asking a question about what had been said or how I had felt. Finally he seemed satisfied and said he'd do what he could. He explained that exorcism was really only for demons and it wasn't something he could do to ghosts, at least not officially – whether or not ghosts actually existed was

apparently just as divisive a question within the church as outside of it – but he would go through some blessings and see if he could help. He asked me to wait outside while he worked, so I headed into the back garden and waited.

As I stood there in the cold, my eyes fell on the tree. That creepy, damn tree. I don't know why, but at that moment I felt an intense, maddening anger at that tree. I picked up a crowbar that lay on a nearby pile of wood and, drawing my arm back, I swung it at the trunk, burying it with all my might. I felt something warm and wet spray out where I had hit it. Sap? No, it didn't feel like sap. I turned on my torch to see blood flowing from the wounded tree. It ran down the crowbar and dripped onto the earth, running in rivulets. As it reached the roots I saw something else in my torch's light, curling up from the base of the tree were old, black scorch marks.

At that moment I made my decision. It was easy, like destroying this tree was the only thing to do, the only path to follow. I found a long chain among the building materials in the garden and wrapped it around the still-bleeding trunk, then attached the ends to my car. It took me less than a minute to pull it down, and there was no more blood. When the tree lay on its side, uprooted and powerless, I gazed into the hole where it had sat and noticed something lying there in the dirt.

Climbing down, I retrieved what turned out to be a small wooden box, about six inches square, with an intricate pattern carved along the outside. Engraved lines covered it, warping and weaving together, making it hard to look away. I opened the box and sitting inside was a single green apple. It looked fresh, shiny, with a coat of condensation like it had just been picked on a cool spring morning. I picked it up. I wasn't going to eat it, I'm not that stupid, but more than bleeding trees or phantom burning, this

confused me. As I took it out of the box, though, it began to turn. The skin turned brown and bruised and started to shrivel in my hand. Then it split. And out came spiders. Dozens, hundreds of spiders erupting from this apple that was rotting right before my eyes. I shrieked and dropped it before any of them could touch my arm. The apple fell to the ground and burst in a cloud of dust. I backed away and waited until I was sure all the spiders had left before retrieving the box. I smashed it with a crowbar and threw the remains into a skip.

Father Burroughs returned shortly afterwards. He told me he'd done his prayers and hoped that it would be some help. If he noticed the felled tree, he didn't ask any questions about it, instead he just handed me his business card and told me to give him a call if there were any further problems. The house didn't feel any different, but there was no smell of burned hair, no heat or ghosts or any weirdness I could see. I worked on that house for another week,

and I don't know if it was the father's prayers or my uprooting the tree but I didn't encounter anything else unusual during my time there. After that, my part of the job was finished, and I haven't been back to Hill Top Road since.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends

Ah, head trauma and latent schizophrenia – the ghost's best friends. Aside from excessive indulgence in psychoactive drugs, it seems to me that there is simply no better way to make contact with the spirit world. Still, glibness aside, the history of 105 Hill Top Road does bear investigation. And while I trust Mr Lensik's testimony of his own experiences about as far as I can throw a bleeding tree, there is a note in the file mentioning that Father Edwin Burroughs put down his own version of these events in Statement 0218011. While I have yet to locate that particular file in the chaos that passed for Gertrude Robinson's

archive, the suggestion that there may be external corroboration does lend some potential credence to Mr Lensik's wild tale. No other workers on the building site at the time reported any disturbances like the ones reported by Mr Lensik.

Martin was unable to find the exact date the original house was built but the earliest records he could find list it as being bought by Walter Fielding in 1891. It was inherited by his son Alfred Fielding in 1923 and then by his grandson, Raymond Fielding, in 1957. There was no record of it being used as a halfway house, certainly not one connected to the local Catholic diocese although the Church of England records for the area that Sasha got access to were unfortunately incomplete. The older residents of Hill Top Road back up the account given by the nurse, Anna Kasuma, as related here.

Tim managed to organise an interview with Mrs Kasuma but she apparently could provide no further

information beyond what she told to Mr Lensik. She did admit though to asking Father Burroughs to take a look at the house as she was worried about it and had seen him perform exorcisms before. There doesn't seem to be any print evidence of what happened to the house; no news stories or similar regarding the fire. But one resident did provide a photograph of the house in flames.

Raymond Fielding's obituary briefly reported his death as having been due to a house fire and lauds his work with troubled youth but gives no details about either. Agnes remains something of a mystery as we have not been able to find any definitive proof that she even existed. Except... We cannot prove any connection but Martin unearthed a report on a Agnes Montague who was found dead in her Sheffield flat on the evening of November 23rd 2006, the same day Mr Lensik claims to have uprooted the tree. She had hanged herself. Her age is given at 26 which doesn't match up at all. But tied by a chain to her waist was

a severed human hand, a right hand. Its owner was never identified but the coroner was apparently quite perplexed, as tissue decay would seem to indicate that the hand's original owner must have died at almost the exact same time as Agnes.

Two families have lived in the house since this statement was originally made but no further manifestations have been reported on Hill Top Road.

End recording.