

MAG042 – #0131103 – “Grifter’s Bone”

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### ARCHIVIST

Statement of Jennifer Ling, regarding a live musical performance she attended in Soho.

Original statement given November 3rd 2013.

Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

### ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Anyone who’s written about music long enough has at least heard of Grifter's Bone. An urban legend, I guess you could call it. Not quite a ghost story, not quite a joke, not quite a real thing.

Sometimes they’re a band, sometime it’s just the one guy. If the story has them as a band, then the only one whose name the old timer knows – because it’s always the old timers telling these

stories – is a guy named Alfred Grifter. Some will swear blind it's his real name, others will just give you a knowing look and ask if it sounds real. Fact is, no-one knows a damn thing about him except the name he goes by, so it's all just story and gossip, but there's still plenty to go around.

Story goes of a mediocre musician with a hunger for more, who turns to the dark arts, usually devil worship or witchcraft, but gets it wrong. I've heard it told as a curse, a badly worded wish or even a devil that just gets mad at being summoned and beats him 'til his hands don't work. The end is always the same, though: his music is so grating, so gut-churningly awful, that he, or sometimes his band, have to sneak into gigs to play unannounced to any audience they can find. And the music is dreadful, a grim cacophony of discord and noise, too much to bear. You can always tell when Grifter's Bone has been on,

they'll tell you, because of all the torn-off ears. They're not entirely wrong.

I've been writing for Earful for a while. Used to just be me, firing my music thoughts onto a blog, but a few years back my then-friend, now-boss Tommy Moncreef said he was starting up a music site, and would I write for it? I said of course I would, and now here I am running video content for it. Earful.com's only been around three years or so, but to be honest in the world of music sites, that gives us a pretty decent pedigree. Tommy's from the old school – used to write for dozens of music magazines, back in the dead tree days, before print became an embarrassing older relative that just wouldn't die. Point is, he knew a lot of older contacts and writers, most of which he brought on board for Earful. That means I was quickly brought up to speed on decades worth of London music scene gossip by middle-aged white men who only ever wore T-shirts for bands that

ended tragically. And *that's* when I started to hear about Grifter's Bone.

Whenever someone was listening to some sub-par submission, or even just some music of their own that wasn't well regarded, one of the old timers, usually Mike Baker, would shout over, "I see you got the new Grifter's Bone album!" or "I didn't know Grifter's Bone reformed!" or something like that. It was annoying as hell, but I never really brought it up. And after hearing every possible variation of the story from a half-dozen drunken writers at our Christmas do, I just kind of decided to let it go.

I didn't think much more about it until earlier this year. There's a guy who works for Earful by the name of Lee Kipple. His official title is 'Submissions Editor', though we call it something a little more vulgar, and it's his job to listen through all the music we're sent unsolicited. CDs, mp3s; recently there's even been a weird fad for

sending in music on novelty USB drives. He listens to all of it. As you can imagine, most of it's awful. Still, Lee is pretty much the nicest guy I've ever met, and I don't think I've ever once heard him complain. He's tall, a bit lanky, with long blond hair that covers his ears. And his eyes if he's not careful.

Because of his job, Lee obviously gets a lot of comments about listening to crappy music, and if it's one of the older folk you can bet they'll mention Grifter's Bone. It took me a while to notice how weird his reaction was when this happened. Whereas most of the staff would fake laugh, sigh or maybe swear a little, Lee would go very still. He'd nod gently, and reach up to scratch his ears, still mostly covered by hair. No-one seemed to notice.

I kept watching him, and the pattern repeated whenever the band was mentioned. I don't know when I decided that he must have seen Grifter's

Bone perform live, but I did. And more than that, I decided he must have fake ears, having torn his own off when he saw the show, and that's why he wore his hair so long to cover them. I didn't really believe it, obviously. It was just a fun little theory I liked to play around with. But the more I watched Lee, the more it seemed that he did deliberately try to keep his ears covered.

Finally, about a month ago, I decided to just ask him. We'd all gone out for drinks, and I'll admit I may have had a few more vodka tonics than would have been wise, but when the others had headed home and it was just Lee left, I decided now was the time. I asked him if they were as bad as everyone said. He looked puzzled, and I leaned in closer. "Grifter's Bone", I said.

He froze, completely still. I waited for him to touch his ears, but instead he just stared at me, unmoving. He began to stutter something about not knowing what I was talking about, but I cut

him off. It was written all over his panicked face; he had seen them.

I watched as he decided whether or not to try and run. There was a moment I was sure he was going to literally bolt for the door, but instead he sighed and nodded his head. It was four years ago, he told me, at *The Good Ship* in Kilburn. Lee had been watching an up-and-coming metal band whose name he could no longer recall – they'd been fine, a bit disappointing, so he was in a mood to finish his drink and leave. The rest of the audience seemed to be of a similar mind, so nobody noticed when a man climbed onto the stage, and set up a small keyboard.

The man was short, so Lee said, and painfully thin, wearing a ratty, old brown suit that draped around him like, in Lee's words, “flaps of ill-fitting skin”. His thinning black hair was slicked back, and his face had a strange look of cruelty to it. As he placed his fingers on his instrument, they left

behind dark red spots on the bright white keys. Lee said he had never heard of Grifter's Bone before that moment, but somehow he knew that's what he was looking at. And then the music started.

After he said this, Lee went very quiet. It was clear he was concentrating very hard. I waited, not wanting to interrupt, but in the end he just shook his head. He couldn't remember the music, he said. He'd tried, but it was just blank. He'd come back to himself wandering the streets of Kilburn almost two hours later, his shirt soaked in blood. Mostly his blood. At this, Lee unbuttoned his shirt and showed me a series of vivid scars slashed onto his chest. The hospital had said it was likely a box cutter of some sort, but he had no memory of it.

By then it looked like he was on the verge of tears, but I couldn't leave it alone. I asked about his ears. He actually laughed at this and said no,

he hadn't torn them off. Reaching up, Lee pulled back his long, blond hair to reveal an ear that, at first glance, appeared normal. Looking closer, though, I saw that he was wearing earplugs, flesh-coloured, so as not to be obvious, and caked around the edges of them was a ring of dried blood. He said it was the only way he'd found to stop it dripping down and ruining his shirts.

I was a bit freaked out at this. Understandably, I think, though it was entirely my own fault, and I had told him he needed to see a doctor if his ears wouldn't stop bleeding. Lee just shook his head, said he'd seen enough doctors to know they couldn't help, and that he had learned to cope with it. We drank the rest of the night in silence, before heading our separate ways.

I know I should have left it alone after that, and I certainly didn't bother Lee again. But I found I, I just couldn't let it go. Either Lee was mad, or Grifter's Bone was real. I started doing research

online. There were a few sites that referenced it as an urban legend. There was a punk duo in Oregon who proudly announced that they had named themselves Grifter's Bone after what they described as "Britain's musical Jack the Ripper". There were a lot of posts on music forums from newbies to the scene asking what Grifter's Bone was. But nowhere had anything even remotely like Lee's story.

Finally, having kinda run out of steam, I threw my findings together into a short feature article, and sent it to Tommy, who dutifully approved it. I figured I'd wasted enough time on the subject that I could at least put it towards something decent for the site. It did alright, though it wasn't enough of a hit to justify the time spent on it. Lee didn't mention it when we next talked – I had asked if I could write up his experience after thoroughly anonymising it, and he'd shrugged and said fine. All in all, it felt like whatever it was that

had hooked me, it was over, and I wasn't too broken up about it.

Then someone left a comment on my article. It just read, "Tonight. Soho." I wouldn't have paid it any attention if it hadn't been for the second line: "No earplugs required". Lee's earplugs, and the reason behind them, had been the only thing he requested I leave out of the article. I mentioned it to Tommy, and he just said something about time-wasters, and how I had better things to do than spend an evening wandering around Soho, randomly walking into music venues.

It probably says something really depressing about my personal life that, actually, I didn't have anything better to do. So that afternoon I was doing exactly that. Wandering around the streets of Soho, making a note of all the performers listed as playing that night. As expected, none of them listed Grifter's Bone as playing, but I made a note of them anyway. It wasn't that late, but it was

already dark, the world illuminated by the colourful glow of the Soho signs and shop fronts. The wind was slow in the narrow streets, but still cut through my thin, woollen coat as I wandered, looking for a small, cruel-looking man in a ragged brown suit.

I'd kept my watch maybe an hour when I saw someone staring at me from the doorway of a small shop. The sign above didn't have an obvious name, simply reading "Crystals. Books. Tarot". He was tall, black and careworn, deep lines of worry etched into an otherwise handsome face. When he saw me looking at him, he began to walk up to me, still with that intense look. I took a couple of steps back, and asked if I could help him. He shook his head as if unsure what to say, then asked me what I was listening to. A chill ran over me as I realised he was staring at my ears.

I said I wasn't listening to anything, as I wasn't wearing headphones, and asked him what he

wanted. He shook his head again, and mumbled something about protecting my hearing. He turned away then, and started walking back into the shop. I was about to follow him when I saw a small group of people turning the corner.

Their features were hard to be sure of in the dark, but walking at the front, dragging a rolling keyboard case, was a short, thin man in an oversized brown suit. The three figures behind him were all much taller than him, but each was stick thin and moved with a jerkiness to their motions. I looked back to where the strange, staring man had been, but he had retreated inside his shop, and the lights were now off, so I began to follow the man I thought to be Alfred Grifter as he and his companions moved down the street. The others all carried instrument cases as well, and no one else on the street seemed to pay them any notice at all, not even when the tallest physically shoved a man out of his path.

Finally, they turned down a flight of stairs, into a basement jazz bar I didn't recognise. After a few seconds I followed them. The bar was dimly lit and quiet, with red and orange lights giving it a warm, smoky feel. Patrons stood around drinking and chatting. I counted eleven in total. I remember I made a note of the number because of how empty the place was. Most seemed to be dressed for an evening of jazz, but I noticed a few of them seemed to be wearing thick coats or jackets, and one, an older white man with a shock of silver hair, appeared to be wearing a silk bathrobe. Behind them, on the stage, Grifter's Bone were setting up their instruments.

Now, despite everything that happened thus far appearing to show the contrary, I am not an idiot. I remembered Lee's story very clearly indeed, and had no intention of staying for the show. Instead, I took out my phone, set it recording video, and placed it in a small alcove near the entrance with a good view of the stage. I checked to make sure

the microphone was working, and then I left. I stood at the top of the stairs into that dingy jazz club and I waited.

After a few minutes of shivering in the cold, I thought I had made a mistake. The streets were deserted, and the previously mild November night had taken on a bone-deep chill. Then I heard it. Muffled through the walls, but still rising distinctly to where I stood, a note. A single, clear note, from what sounded like a cello. It was joined by others, a keyboard, a guitar, and over them all the pure piping sound of a flute. It was beautiful. It was some of the most achingly beautiful music I had ever heard. Then the screams began.

There was no build-up to the screams; no lead-up to explain the sudden eruption of sounds of agony. There were crashes as well, noises of impact and, once or twice, something that sounded like tearing. Through it all, in the background, played that beautiful music. I stood

there, frozen in place, not wanting to go down there, but not feeling able to flee, as below all I could hear was haunting music and butchery.

I went to pull out my mobile to phone the police, but I realised I had left it down there, recording in the jazz club. I finally made the decision to run for help, when the noises ceased abruptly, and there was silence. I looked around for anyone who might have heard the cries of pain and panic, and be coming to help, but there was no-one. Just me. I began to slowly, carefully, make my way down towards the basement. If whoever was down there wanted to kill me, I would be easy enough to find with the information on my phone. One way or another I was at their mercy.

When I opened the door it was hard to know exactly what I was looking at. In the dull red light, the torn and mangled remains of the people I had seen alive not half an hour ago, were almost indistinguishable from the carpet and furnishings.

On stage, the musicians calmly packed away their instruments. They did not have a spot of blood on them. The one in the brown suit, who I assumed to be Alfred Grifter, looked up. He gazed straight into my eyes and said, "Encore?" I grabbed my phone and ran.

I didn't phone the police. I was too scared of what might happen. I watched the news obsessively, waiting to see anything on the massacre, but there was nothing. It's been almost a week now, and I've heard *nothing*. I haven't been able to access the footage from that night. My phone says it's incorrectly formatted somehow, but I'll keep trying. I did go back to the jazz club, but I can find no sign of violence, no sign of Grifter's Bone, and no sign of the eleven people who died that night.

**ARCHIVIST**

Statement ends.

Our own investigations into the band "Grifter's Bone" yielded little that Ms. Ling did not include in her own, remarkably comprehensive article "Spooks and solos: the slim pickings of Grifter's Bone". Certainly her statement appears to be easily the most detailed account of any encounter with the band, assuming it is to be trusted. The Dean Street Jazz Club strenuously denies any violence took place on its premises during the dates in question, and there are no police reports that seem to match up with Ms. Ling's description.

Well, I suppose that's not quite true. According to police reports, in the month of October 2013, there were a total of eleven deaths by violence in the Greater London area. It's impossible to match the details of all of them based on the information in Ms. Ling's statement, but one of the victims, Mr. Albert Sands, 67 years old, and beaten to death in his own home. Although it happened two weeks before the events of this statement,

according to the police he was wearing a silk dressing gown when he was brutally murdered.

We are unfortunately unable to follow up with Ms. Ling; it seems roughly two weeks after giving this statement she assaulted Agatha Norrell, her elderly neighbour, with a claw hammer. Ms. Norrell was left in a coma from which she did not recover, while Ms. Ling turned the hammer upon herself. By the time the police arrived she had done so much damage to her head that... there was no hope of saving her. I have an uncomfortable feeling she might have finally gotten that video to work.

End recording.

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Supplement. I've been watching Martin. He's been very attentive to my needs and recovery since I returned to work, almost to the exclusion of his own tasks. Previously I might have ascribed such ministrations to his own lax work ethic, but in the stress of Prentiss' attack, I am sure I glanced moments of competence, or even cunning, that are beyond what his previous work would indicate. Is he playing the fool? Purposefully failing in his tasks to delay or hinder my investigations? It's possible. He has also shown remarkable interest in my own theories as to who killed Gertrude. I have thus far diverted him by saying I believe it to be whatever is lurking in the tunnels below, but he seems... unsatisfied by that response.

I'm glad he's moved out of the Archives, as it gives me a chance to work here without his constant presence. Also because he managed to leave some of his possessions behind, for the most part it's just a few books of relatively awful poetry. There are a few pieces I feel could almost

have been affecting if his style wasn't so obviously enamoured with Keats, but there is an unfinished letter addressed to his mother in Devon, in which he mentions that he is worried about “the others finding out I've been lying”. It may be nothing, some inconsequential deception or other – after all, it is ostensibly written to his mother – but if it was actually to be sent to someone else... I will keep my eye on Martin.

End supplement.

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