

MAG087 – #0141010 – “The Uncanny Valley”

[CLICK]

**GEORGIE**

Look, I’m really not sure about this.

**ARCHIVIST**

I just need to borrow it for a half hour or so. I, I’ll look after it.

**GEORGIE**

Wha— No, I don’t—

You can blow it up for all I care. It’s been in the loft for, like, twenty years. If I need tape hiss, I’ll add it in post.

**ARCHIVIST**

So, what’s the problem?

**GEORGIE**

With playing an unmarked tape from your stalker?

**ARCHIVIST**

Uh...

Look, you just have to trust me, okay.

**GEORGIE**

Yeah, and I want to do that, but how can I when you still won't tell me what's going on?

**ARCHIVIST**

You wouldn't believe me!

**GEORGIE**

Try me.

## ARCHIVIST

...

[Sigh] You're right.

It's... It's alright. I can just go.

## GEORGIE

Come on, I'm not throwing you out, John. I know you wouldn't be here if you had anywhere else to go, and I... I do want to help, but... y'know, you're a good person. You were, at least. But whatever this is, it's messing you up!

[Sigh] Look I've, I've got work to do. You listen, or don't listen, or cross-record, or whatever you want, just... just think about it first, okay? You can choose to leave it alone.

[DOOR CLOSES]

[SIGH]

[TAPE PLAYER IS LOADED]

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

## GERTRUDE

Case 0141010, Sebastian Skinner. Incident occurred in Gwydir Forest, North Wales, September 2014. Statement given 10th of October, 2014. Committed to tape 4th of April, 2015. Gertrude Robinson recording.

## GERTRUDE (STATEMENT)

Everyone always tells me I don't notice things. "Sebastian," they say, "you wouldn't notice if you grew a second nose." And I suppose in many ways that's true. It's not that I'm forgetful or stupid,

you understand, just that I'm not very good at spotting things that are out of place. The mind has a way of filling in things it's not concentrating on; just wallpapering them over with what you expect to see. I rather think *that* part of my brain is more powerful than in most people. I'll never notice if you got a new haircut or piercing, and it's a bit of gamble whether I notice when you've had a baby.

You'd think that'd get in the way of being a plumber, but it really hasn't, to be honest. The thing you've got to remember is, if I know what I need to focus on I spot things just fine. And plumbing's great for that – depending on the problem, there's always the things I know need checking, one after the other, until one of them doesn't look right. Then the fix is usually simple enough. There's no need to look at the thing as a whole, or pinpoint changes or oddities.

So, even now, thinking back, it's hard to say if there was anything particularly strange about the call as it came in. Saying that I didn't notice anything out of the ordinary doesn't really mean anything in that context. I suppose that the location they gave me was a bit of a surprise. I run my business out of Penmachno, out in Gwydir Forest, and it's not exactly a densely populated area. I service people all over the region, and I wasn't aware of any village or buildings out in the area of the woods the caller directed me to. I mean, they had co-ordinates on GPS, as there were no street names that they could give for reference. It was an area I did sometimes drive through, and I didn't remember anything being there, but I also didn't really think about it at the time. I suppose I reasoned that maybe there were some houses out there and, well, I hadn't noticed.

The problem sounded like a simple enough blockage, so I packed up my van, and started the journey over. It shouldn't have taken nearly as long as it did, but the roads aren't all that easy to navigate at night, even with your satnav doing its best, and especially when heading towards somewhere you're not familiar with, trying to find the right road to get into some hidden valley or other. The call must have come in about seven thirty, as I'd just finished my dinner. I don't normally do night callouts, but something about it had seemed urgent, and they had agreed to double my standard rate.

I pulled up to a small collection of ramshackle looking buildings, made of wood and corrugated sheet metal, all set up around a large central building, that seemed like some sort of workshop or small factory. At first I thought it might have been a logging facility, but we were only a few

miles from Penmachno, so if there were trees being chopped down here, I'd have known about it. Probably. I mean, even I'd be hard-pressed to miss the sound of industrial chainsaws.

I pulled off the side of what seemed like a makeshift car park and got out. Somebody came over to meet me. Megan, she said her name was, and that we'd spoken on the phone. She was very still when she said this, and seemed to be waiting for me to respond, so I grabbed my tools, and told her to show me to the plughole. She seemed a bit taken aback by this, so I apologised, assuming I'd been a bit too crude for her, and I asked her where I could find the problem drain.

She led me up to the big building, gripped the door, and flung it open wide. There was a damp, metallic smell that came from inside. Probably from the backed up drain, I thought, although I

will admit it didn't smell much like anything I'd encountered before. Megan was stood in the doorway, arms spread wide for some reason, but to be honest I'd been checking my tools, and hadn't really seen what she was doing. I asked her again to take me to the drain, and she made a rather *odd* noise, and led me inside.

We walked through the main floor of the workshop, with people bustling about either side, doing whatever it was they were doing. My mind was focused on the job at hand. Megan took me into a back room full of pipes and gratings, and pointed to a drain in the centre of the floor where dark water was pooling out of the top. You'd have thought the dark red would have clued me in to what was happening but, honestly, there are all sorts of industrial chemicals that turn water that colour, so it didn't really register as worrying. So, I pulled up the grate, and got to work.

All through it, Megan was chatting with me quietly. She was whispering, making it a bit hard to hear her over the noise from the main building, so I mostly just nodded and made the appropriate sounds of interest. And I thought she was talking about her hobbies. After all, I'd never actually heard the term 'flensing' before, and the way she was talking about it I assumed it was some sort of a sculpture. I mean, you meet all sorts of strange people in my line of work, and I pride myself on being able to keep up a gentle conversation with all of them. I have, of course, since looked up flensing, and that certainly throws a lot of that conversation into a very different light indeed. I don't think she was offering to do a sculpture of me.

Anyway, soon enough I'd found the blockage: a big old wad of hardened fat and oil that had

congealed at one of the bends, and removed it for them. It wasn't nearly as big a job as I'd been afraid it might have been, and I talked Megan through my invoicing procedure as we walked back through the workshop floor. She was silent as I left, and seemed as though she was trying to get over some sort of shock. I guessed that she'd come over a bit queasy when I'd pulled out the blockage, and was embarrassed to admit it. It's a common enough thing: the sight of the sort of mess that builds up in drainpipes can really get to you if you're not used to it. Anyway, I decided not to mention anything, just handed her my details, and told her I'd be in touch about payment. Then I hopped back into my van and drove away. Job done.

At least, I had assumed it was job done. I wish, I very much wish, that it *had* been job done. It was the next day that the phone rang, about midday,

and the now-familiar voice of Megan asked me to come back. She said that they were having the same problem, but with a different drain. This struck me as a little bit odd, since I'd been pretty sure a building like that would only have one central drain, which I had already sorted out. Still, there was no harm in going to have a look, I told myself. After all, they clearly didn't know anything about plumbing over there, and if I took good care of them I might have gotten myself a nice supply of repeat business. So once again I packed up my truck, and started the drive.

It was the most infuriating thing. Even in the daylight, having been there once already, finding the little valley proved remarkably difficult. I'd set out in good time, but it was still getting well into the afternoon when I finally pulled up into the small, dirt clearing. I hopped out to a sight that, in the daylight, even I noticed was deeply odd:

Megan was stood there, waving a greeting at me, dressed in some sort of bright, blue and red costume, like a jester or a clown. Had she been wearing that the night before? Surely not. Although, I suppose I didn't really look at her clothes. Sat on a folding chair next to her was a squat, thickly muscled woman with close-cropped black hair, who stared at me with a really vicious-looking smirk. She exchanged a glance with Megan, who just nodded at her, and then she burst into cruel laughter, and I was suddenly feeling very uncomfortable.

I just stood there, toolbox in hand, debating whether or not to turn around and drive away. I had just about decided to leave when I felt Megan's hand grip my wrist. I hadn't noticed her moving towards me. Her fingers dug into me, and they felt really, really wrong. Like hard plastic wrapped in raw bacon. She was strong though,

strong enough to drag me toward the big workshop and its open door. I was struggling, and told her to let me go, but she just ignored me. I cried out to the woman sat on the lawn chair for help, but she just laughed harder.

I was still begging for help when I felt Megan's hard, cold fingers dig into the top of my head and turn it to face into the building. I hadn't noticed that we'd reached the door, but in the afternoon sunlight, the reality of what I had walked through the night before was clearly shown in terrible detail.

Rows and rows of old and broken stools stood before crude frames of wire and wood. Sat on each stool were figures of all shapes and sizes. None of them were human. Some were wood themselves, old, and stained with rot. Some were a shiny, dark plastic or porcelain white. A few

were cloth and hessian, stuffed to bursting and leaking sawdust from a dozen places. All of them were featureless, and moved with a jerky motion like nothing I had seen outside of my dreams. Each gripped a razor-sharp knife, and moved it swiftly over the human heads suspended in the frames from wire and fishhooks, gently cutting around the edges. I could see the rest of the bodies piled haphazardly in the corner, and for a second all I was able to do was wonder why they didn't smell worse than they did.

Then all the cutting figures turned to face me at once, and I screamed. And when I screamed, the eyes of every head swivelled in their frames and stared at me with the desperate pleading that told me they still knew pain. I was babbling, pleading with Megan, asking what she wanted. "I want you to meet our boss," she said lightly. I didn't know who that was, and she stared at me, skin starting

to slip away from her painted-on eyes. "You may call them I Do Not Know You."

I don't know why those words filled me with such deep dread, but I felt every muscle in my body tighten. On instinct, and without warning, I swung the toolbox up with all the force I had in me into Megan's face, and heard the crunching crack of something brittle shatter. Her hand released my arm as I stared at her, face now twisted and hanging off the dark plastic of her head, the empty mouth moving, trying to match the vile sounds coming from the rest of her.

I ran, sprinting back to my van as fast as I could, only to see that the woman with the cropped hair had stood up and moved to the driver's side door. I didn't have time to slow down; I just prepared to try and tackle her, when she did something I

didn't expect. She opened the door for me, and stepped back.

Not taking time to consider this, I leapt into the seat, and started to fumble for the keys. The engine roared to life immediately, and I was just about to get the out of there when I realised I could feel the woman's hand on my shoulder. I looked at her, the door still open, and she winked at me. Without warning, a terrible, blistering heat erupted on my back, and I screamed again, this time in agony. Reflex slammed my foot down, and I felt the car start as she removed her hand, laughing that same horrible laugh.

I did manage to get away, though there's a good chance I'll never use this arm properly again. I went to the police, of course. I didn't tell them exactly what happened, just that I'd noticed what I believed to be human remains during a job, and

had been attacked as I tried to leave. They actually took me seriously, and were all prepared to drive out to investigate, as I understand it, when the fire started. The worst fire in Gwydir Forest for almost two hundred years, apparently. Some of the most beautiful natural scenery in the world reduced to ash. It destroyed my home, as well as quite a few of the others in Penmachno, but luckily nobody died. The weirdest part, though? Nobody died, officially speaking, because although the police, fire crews and forest services combed the burned area acre by scorched acre, they didn't find any human remains at all. The closest they found was the warped and twisted frame of an old, plastic mannequin.

## GERTRUDE

Final comments: When this statement was added to the Collection, I was convinced it was the Stranger issuing me a direct threat. Mr Sebastian

Skinner. It seemed too targeted a name to be real. But all my research points to him being a real person: a plumber trading out of Penmachno for almost twenty years. Hopefully not too ominous a coincidence.

The concerning part of this statement, at least as far as I'm concerned, is not so much **what** is happening, as the fact that it is happening so soon. I had assumed Orsinov and her ilk would have spent more time searching for their precious skin, maybe even acting against me directly, before they started alternate preparations. I had hoped I'd have a chance to recover. I can still barely stand.

I'd hoped there would be more time.

As with anything like this, exact calculations are impossible, but based on Mr. Skinner's testimony,

I think there's every likelihood that they will be ready to perform the Unknowing within the next few years. There may be no chance for a more... 'nuanced' way to disrupt it, so I'll likely have to resort to a somewhat more... direct countermeasure. Hmm.

It interests me that Jude Perry would be involved. I was unaware that The Lightless Flame had had any contact with the Stranger's ilk, but I suppose it makes sense that it would be a possible ally to the Devastation, especially since their own plans have so recently, erm, gone up in flames. Perhaps they hope to achieve a pride of place in the world Orsinov hopes to bring about? Or maybe, they simply relished the chance to burn down some beautiful forest.

Regardless, I've been keeping an eye on Jude's movements ever since she lost Agnes, and it

appears she's back in Havering. Part of me wants to confront her, see what she knows, but I'm not that desperate. Not yet. [Sigh]

I've been unable to contact Mr. Skinner since he gave his statement. Sad, but unsurprising. There's no doubt in my mind that when the Unknowing begins, one of the dancers will be wearing his face.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

### ARCHIVIST

Hmm. What strikes me more than anything else here is the date. It's only a year or so before she died. I had assumed Gertrude had recorded to tape for a while and then stopped, but it seems she was recording them right up until the end. But if

they did span decades of working at the Institute, why aren't there more? And what decided which statements she transferred?

Regardless, whoever my mystery pen pal is, it seems they're pushing me in a very deliberate direction. It sounds like the Unknowing is a ritual, one connected to the Stranger, this 'I Do Not Know You'. What did Gertrude mean about skin? The page she was given by Mary, maybe? No, that doesn't add up. [Sigh] God, this is confusing. For the first time, though, I feel like I might have a lead. It's tangential, not directly connected to the Stranger or the Unknowing, but... but I have a name now. Jude Perry, and she was still living in London less than two years ago. It's not much, but it is a start. I don't know if I have the resources to track her down myself, but if Melanie's willing to help, the Institute might have more luck.

[FAINT SOUNDS OF CALLIOPE MUSIC COME  
DRIFTING IN]

### ARCHIVIST

If she is an active member of the Lightless Flame  
cult there's every possibility tracking her down  
will be dangerous, but it's also the... the only...?

[STARTS BREATHING HEAVILY]

[Sotto voce, shakily] Oh god...

[DOOR OPENS]

### GEORGIE

Can you hear that? Like a, an ice cream van or  
something?

### ARCHIVIST

Circus!

**GEORGIE**

Yeah. Yeah, thought I was going mad. Christ, are you alright?

[THE MUSIC FADES AWAY]

**ARCHIVIST**

Ummm...

**GEORGIE**

Was it the tape?

**ARCHIVIST**

What? No! No, it w— it w— it was— it was outside.

**GEORGIE**

No, not, not the music, your face!

ARCHIVIST

What?

GEORGIE

That's it. Whatever the hell this deal is, the tapes, documents, I don't want them in my house.

ARCHIVIST

Look, look... No, no...

Look, you, you don't need to be scared.

GEORGIE

I'm not! You are! Look at you, you can barely stand!

ARCHIVIST

But I... But I need—

**GEORGIE**

Listen to me, John. I can't stop you doing...  
whatever secret bullshit you want to do, and I'm...  
not going to throw you out on the street, but I'm  
not having it in by home.

**ARCHIVIST**

No... No, they won't. I'll make sure it doesn't... I'll  
keep it far away.

**GEORGIE**

No, you need to stop.

**ARCHIVIST**

I'm not sure I can.

[CLICK]