

MAG113 – #571-U – “Breathing Room”

[CLICK]

[ALL AUDIO IS SOMEWHAT MUFFLED, AS IF THE
TAPEDECK IS IN A BAG OR BOX]

[RATTLE OF A ROLL-UP SHUTTER OPENING]

ARCHIVIST

There.

MARTIN

Huh.

ARCHIVIST

What?

MARTIN

I just... I thought it would be less... I don't know, crowded.

ARCHIVIST

Oh, you know Gertrude. If something's worth doing, it's worth... looking through two dozen unmarked cardboard boxes for.

MELANIE

So, what are we looking for?

ARCHIVIST

I'm... still not exactly sure. I-It might be an old, taxidermied gorilla skin. Or... not. Apparently it should be obvious.

MELANIE

Right. Then let's get on with it.

[NOISES OF MOVEMENT & SEARCHING]

MARTIN

So, you actually met vampire Trevor then?

ARCHIVIST

I mean, I, I met... quite a few people from the statements. You remember, er, Dr Elliott's statement? The anatomy students trying to pose as people, who definitely weren't people?

MARTIN

Oh... y-yeah.

ARCHIVIST

Well, turns out one of them became a police officer. Or, pretended to.

MARTIN

Ugh, ooh... Is that the one Trevor...?

ARCHIVIST

Yes.

MARTIN

And he... killed it?

ARCHIVIST

Umm... That's— I mean, it's not as simple as...
Found anything yet?

MARTIN

Er... er... Bunch of... eyeless paintings.

MELANIE

[Jovially] Snap! Eyeless dolls. Oh, and just a lot of
shredded newspapers.

ARCHIVIST

Same.

MARTIN

Mmm.

Ooh! Ooh! There's a book in this one.

ARCHIVIST

[Hastily] Don't... touch it!

MARTIN

Ooh... OH! Right, yes.

ARCHIVIST

Let's... not touch any books we don't know.

MARTIN

Right.

ARCHIVIST

Step back.

[PAUSE, THEN CAUTIOUS PAGE TURNING]

ARCHIVIST

[Exhales] It's just a notebook. I think... um...

[MARTIN SIGHS IN RELIEF]

MARTIN

What's in it?

ARCHIVIST

Not sure, er... Names, locations, dates. I'll, I'll check properly later. Doesn't look like it's to do with the Unknowing, I don't think.

Right.

[SEARCHING RESUMES]

MARTIN

So... how was it?

ARCHIVIST

Ah?

MARTIN

America? And China? I've never really actually done any, you know, travelling.

MELANIE

It's not all that. Sometimes you get shot by a ghost.

ARCHIVIST

And refuse to give a statement about it.

MELANIE

Yup!

ARCHIVIST

It was nice, Martin.

[Reconsiders] It was... weird. Paranoia is an odd combination with culture shock. Really rather disorientating.

MARTIN

I mean... it wasn't actually paranoia, though, was it? Because, they *were* out to get you.

ARCHIVIST

I suppose that they were.

MELANIE

Wasn't a great time back here, either.

ARCHIVIST

Oh, god, Melanie, of course. I'm... I'm sorry. If I'd known that Ivy Meadows was—

MELANIE

What?! You'd have told me? Let me learn from one of your statements instead of from Elias? I don't see that changing anything.

ARCHIVIST

Even so, I... am... I'm sorry.

MELANIE

I don't need your apology. Or your pity.

ARCHIVIST

Of course. [Then much quieter] Of course.

Martin's plan is solid. I think.

MARTIN

I mean, they might just kill him.

MELANIE

Good.

ARCHIVIST

I mean, maybe. But... I think they're still our best chance. Even if we did manage to blindside him, I-I don't know how long we could... hold him.

MARTIN

And, in fairness, he's happy enough to use the police against us.

ARCHIVIST

Quite. And I'd rather not be staring down a kidnapping charge on top of everything—

MELANIE

[Urgently] Uh, John?

ARCHIVIST

Yes?

MELANIE

I... I think I found that gorilla skin you were talking about...

ARCHIVIST

Perfect! Er, now if we could just—

MELANIE

Or, I'm afraid... uh, what's, what's left of it.

ARCHIVIST

Oh.

MELANIE

Yeah.

ARCHIVIST

So... she did destroy it.

MELANIE

Apparently.

ARCHIVIST

Right.

[SOUNDS OF BOX LATCHES BEING UNDONE AS
THE ARCHIVIST SPEAKS]

So if that's... not what we're looking for...

MARTIN

J-J-John, John!

ARCHIVIST

What?

MARTIN

I think I've found it!

ARCHIVIST

W-Wh-What is it?

[MELANIE CACKLES]

MELANIE

I think you're gonna want to see this!

ARCHIVIST

Good lord! Is... Is that...?

MELANIE

Looks like it.

ARCHIVIST

Where the hell did she get this? I—

Martin, don't touch it!

MARTIN

Sorry!

ARCHIVIST

Is it... stable?

MELANIE

How should I know? I don't even know what kind it is!

ARCHIVIST

I mean, it looks like... C4?

MELANIE

Are you just saying that because it's the only plastic explosive you've ever heard of?

ARCHIVIST

Well, I mean, that is to say...

MARTIN

—so many others—

ARCHIVIST

M-Martin! Stop trying to *touch* the plastic explosive!

MARTIN

Sorry. Sorry. Sorry.

MELANIE

Guys...

ARCHIVIST

Just put your hands in your pockets, or... something...

MARTIN

Look, I said, I said I'm sorry...

MELANIE

Guys!

ARCHIVIST & MARTIN

What?

MELANIE

Do you hear that?

MARTIN

Hear what?

ARCHIVIST

Oh...

MELANIE

It's like...

ARCHIVIST

Oh goddammit...

Oookay.

MELANIE

Is, is that...?

[UNZIPPING OF A BAG]

MARTIN

[Explodes] What were you thinking bringing that along?!

ARCHIVIST

I just— I mean— I forgot!

MELANIE

[Indignant & furious] You forgot?!

MARTIN

[Screeching] Turn it off!

ARCHIVIST

I am! Just give me a second—

MELANIE

[Clenched teeth] Turn it off!

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

[Deep sigh] Statement of Adelard Dekker, regarding the near death and subsequent activities of Justin Gough. Statement undated, likely circa 2012. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Gertrude,

It should all be here, though god knows I was tempted to take a block for myself just in case. I won't even press you for where you got it, though if some of these leads pan out I might need to ask you to track down some more. I assume whatever surveillance meant you needed me to move it, is only keeping track of *you*, but let me know if there's anything I need to be on the lookout for. Anyway, you owe me a favour. And... maybe another one once you read this. It might come to nothing, but it's something you should probably be aware of. I'll even make it a statement. Give your patron something to keep it satisfied. It's not like I sleep enough to worry about dreams.

I was pursuing my researches into the new emergence I mentioned earlier. I know you are dismissive of the possibility, but if I'm right, the sudden urgency of these "immediate dangers" you are so focused on could very well be a direct result. But that's for another day, as this particular instance turned out to be unconnected. The point is, I was alerted to a series of deaths by a coroner friend of mine.

Although all signs pointed to carbon monoxide poisoning, the bodies showed signs of acute distress. The sort you don't normally get when you die in your sleep. There was blood pooled in the back of the throat, and the vocal cords were shredded, although no neighbours reported hearing a sound. And most importantly, at all three scenes there was evidence of a second person who had apparently left without suffering

any ill effects. The deaths were about a fortnight apart, and when the third came in with the same symptoms, Bianca, the coroner, called me in. For the last few years we've had an... arrangement. I slip her a bit of cash to feed a nasty habit she has, and if she's called to any inquest which looks strange, I'm the first to know.

Despite her weakness, Bianca is still a damn good coroner, and filled me in on the details quickly. The deaths had been carbon monoxide, she said, and by way of example showed me a plastic cup full of blood. It was bright red. "Cherry red", Bianca told me, a good sign of CO poisoning. But apparently they hadn't found any trace of the gas in the homes of the deceased. Current theory was that someone was deliberately gassing people while they slept, but Bianca was adamant that, as far as she could tell, it seemed to have bypassed the lungs completely, appearing right into their

blood as carbohaemoglobin or whatever. From the look on their faces I could tell two things. It had hurt. And they had never woken up.

You see why I thought this might be related?

Well, hoped more than thought, maybe. The man-made nature of it seemed like a potential link, but it had few of the other hallmarks. Still, I thought it was worth following up on. Finding who was... killing these people in their sleep.

It's odd, isn't it? Sleep. That you can never remember or fully pin down the exact moment you lose consciousness. Just lying there, waiting to find yourself in a dream without the first clue or interest in how or when you got there. Or to find your eyes closed and force them open to sunlight and morning, only realising that sleep has happened in retrospect. I wonder if... death is the same way? No clear dividing line, just... gone, only

to realise after it's happened, except for the fact that there isn't an after. Is that a comforting thought or a terrifying one? Depends on who you are, I suppose. It bothered me when I was young. If I thought too hard about the concept of sleep, of exactly what it was, I would worry myself, and end up having to turn the light on, and read for an hour or two. Everyone always talks about how they want to die in there sleep, but honestly, I think that's the death that scares me the most.

But that's a meditation for another day. As far as these deaths were concerned, I was confident there was *something* turning up in people's houses and doing this to them. My first thought was a direct manifestation, but the more I looked into it, the more I suspected maybe it was some poor soul who got in too deep. I don't know if my little 'theoretical' is strong enough yet to start

taking avatars, but this one, as you've no doubt guessed, turned out to be Terminus.

Justin Gough, his name was. He was admitted to Accident and Emergency at Whipps Cross Hospital about two months ago, suffering from – I'm sure it will come as no surprise – acute carbon monoxide poisoning. He had been camping, and taken a small barbeque into his tent to keep warm. And it... warmed his lungs all the way to the hospital. He was terrified and unintelligible, and then he died. For fifty-two seconds. According to the duty nurse, that is how long Justin Gough was clinically dead, before they managed to restart his heart and get him on a breather machine.

It's hard to scream with a breathing tube in you, but apparently he gave it a noble attempt when he woke up. The nurse I talked to hadn't been

there, but he had apparently had some sort of near-death experience, and had been describing awful visions to those attending him, muttering obliquely about “terrible things” he’d had to do to return, and prices that would need to be paid.

None of the staff who were present would willingly say much more about it, but it had clearly shaken them.

Justin Gough was discharged shortly after, and in rapid succession quit his job, disappeared from social media, and cut off effectively *all* human contact. He became, to all intents and purposes, a recluse who hasn’t left the house since. Or so the neighbours would say. I had a suspicion that he was leaving, but by night, and for a single, very specific purpose. To pay a debt. While many fall to the Powers through love or terror, sometimes it can be as simple as what you owe. After all, most debts are paid out of fear.

The hospital refused to give me his address, but I managed to acquire it anyway. His building was a squalid little apartment block, in such a state I found it hard to believe that he'd had to go camping in order to get poisoned. The windows were well-barred against intruders, and I didn't think this was a situation where I could simply knock on the door. So I waited. For two days I sat there, watching the damp eat away at the bricks of that half-rotten building. I was all but ready to write it off, and look for another option, when at last the front door opened and out stepped Justin Gough.

Now, I didn't have a picture of the man, and had been intending to go on the description given by the hospital workers, but in the end I recognised him simply by the thin trickle of cherry red blood that rolled slowly down his chin, and the fact that,

as I watched him descend the steps of his building and walk out onto the pavement, I am quite sure that I did not see him breathe.

He was not tall man, but his frame was rail-thin, and what face I was able to make out was gaunt and hollow. We've both seen our share of bodies, Gertrude, so you will understand what I mean when I tell you he had the 'eyes of the dead'. They moved and they focused, but that subtle glimmer that shows life was wholly absent. All that was left was a skittish sort of terror, as he glanced over his shoulder, desperate to see if he was being followed, and of course overlooking me completely.

This worried me. As you know, I am not by any means a Hunter, and if Justin Gough was as far gone as he appeared, it was likely he was no longer human enough for me to remove him

without the aid of one. And while I do know one or two I believe are touched by the scent of blood, they are... unpredictable, and I was reluctant to call on them in any but the most dire circumstances, which I did not believe this to be. So I simply followed him, hoping to get slightly more of an idea of exactly what he was doing.

His walk had a *certainty* to it. I never once saw him consult a map, or pause to consider his destination. He knew exactly where he was going, and his steps were slow and implacable. There was... an inevitability to his movements, and I think that is when I realised he was simply serving The End, which I won't pretend wasn't a disappointment. But still, I thought if I could deal with him and save a few lives, I might as well.

He walked for some hours, until finally coming upon a small house down a cul-de-sac near

Hackney Wick. It seemed... unremarkable, and had nothing to distinguish it from those that surrounded it. He walked up to the door and pushed it gently. It opened silently, and he walked inside. So I waited a minute or two, watching for any movement within, listening for any sound that might break the still, humid air. But there was nothing, and I followed him inside.

Justin Gough was sat in the main bedroom. His back pressed against the wall opposite a bed, where a middle-aged man lay sleeping. The room was quiet, and at first I thought there was no movement at all, but as I watched, I saw the face of the man in the bed contort and spasm, as though racked with awful nightmares, his chest heaving and convulsing as he struggled to breathe. I looked to the man I assumed to be his assailant, but to all appearances, it seemed like Justin Gough was also asleep, sat in the corner of

that nondescript suburban bedroom. But then I saw his eyelids flicker, and I realised what was going on.

What is the line between a near-death experience and a dream? Perhaps you do leave yourself, brush against the afterlife and return, but... I don't believe it. I believe they are both simply the firings of a brain we no longer have control over, and perhaps if you make contact with something terrible in one, it continues to live with you in the other. And perhaps it demands you infect others with your fate.

I was not quick enough to save the man who lived in that house. Truth be told, I didn't especially try. I didn't think I would be able to move quick enough to do so, and was more concerned with being quiet and thorough. The cutlery drawer was

largely empty, but after a minute's searching I did find what I was after: a long, metal skewer.

Did you know there are certain forms of brain injury that cut you off from your ability to dream? Ironically enough, it's sometimes caused by carbon monoxide poisoning, but there is still no definitive answer about which part of the brain needs to be injured for it to happen. So I made the decision it was better to be on the safe side, as I pushed the point up past his eye, sliding it into that little gap between eyeball and tear duct, and up into his brain.

I knew it wouldn't kill him, he's too far from human for me to do so, but I thought that scrambling his brain a bit was probably my best bet. And I was right, as far as it goes. He survived what I did to him, and when the police picked him up after an 'anonymous tip' about a break-in, he

was barely able to speak, and I very much hope I managed to sever his dreams.

I have no interest in pursuing this further, but given the mind's remarkable aptitude for healing, not to mention the resilience of creatures like him, I cannot make any guarantees Justin Gough will remain in the state I left him. And it seems that, as he deals in dreams, it may be worth your while to keep an eye on the statements you take, in case he finds his way here. I'm sure you can take care of yourself, of course, but I thought it would be worth letting you know. Good luck, Gertrude. And enjoy the fireworks.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

This was found tucked into a hard case containing... many blocks of plastic explosive, kept

by Gertrude Robinson in a storage unit that I can only assume has... extremely lax oversight. It is *unclear* if she ever read it.

You know, after my conversation with Gerard, I, I actually thought I was starting to get a handle on everything, how it works, the connections between it all. It is... strangely reassuring to have a statement where, once again, I find myself having... remarkably little idea what it's talking about. Justin Gough was clearly an avatar of The End, but... I have no idea what else Dekker was alluding to.

So Gertrude knew Adelard Dekker as well? I wonder is there anyone connected to the supernatural that she was not on first name terms with? I suppose if you spend fifty years as the focal point of horrors, eventually everyone ends up knowing you. Or dead. Or... both.

I know there are more important things to be doing, but I did ask Basira to have a quick search for Justin Gough, see what might have happened to him. There are records of his residence in an East London care facility until 2015, when he disappears from their records. Several deaths among the staff apparently occurred at roughly the same time. And it will come as no surprise that the inquest returned a verdict of carbon monoxide poisoning in each case.

I'm not too concerned, to be honest, my dreams are, uh... well, let's just say I don't think they're going to be letting anyone else in any time soon.

End recording.