

MAG104 – #0171406 – “Sneak Preview”

[CLICK]

[CALMING BREATH]

MARTIN

Statement of Eduardo Acosta, regarding the night
of October 9th—

[SUDDEN CRASH OF TUMBLING BOXES AND
MARTIN EMITS A LITTLE SHRIEK]

TIM

[Unapologetically] Sorry.

[SOUNDS OF BOXES & FILES BEING MOVED
AROUND DURING THE CONVERSATION]

MARTIN

Oh Christ, Tim! Oh, I... huh, oh, oh God, it's alright, it's just a shock. I didn't realise you were...

TIM

[Dourly] I've been moving boxes in here for a while.

MARTIN

You... have you?

TIM

Yeah. Everything alright?

MARTIN

Yeah, I guess. I kind of... zone out a bit when I have to read a statement.

TIM

Right.

...

Well, see ya.

MARTIN

Oh no, Tim! Uh, Tim!

TIM

Hmm?

MARTIN

Uh, while I've got you, there's a book I was after for, uh... well, it was, uh, uh, *The Marvellous Spiritualism and the Circus in the 19th Century*? I asked up in the Library, but Tom said you had it checked out?

TIM

Yeah. Why?

MARTIN

Oh, you know, just looking into anything and everything that might pin down The Unknowing.

TIM

The what?

MARTIN

[Cautiously] The Unknowing?

TIM

Well, am I supposed to know what that is or, or what?

MARTIN

You don't—

Ah, ummm, heh heh, I just thought someone would have *told* you by now.

TIM

Well, they haven't.

[Pointedly] What are you talking about?

MARTIN

I mean, I'm not... sure—

TIM

Martin! What is The Unknowing? And what does it have to do with the Circus?

MARTIN

It's... it's uh, uh, a ritual. I don't know the... it's, it's bad. Like, like really bad. Like, maybe 'end of the world' bad. And the Circus is doing it, the, the, the Russian ones, the, uh, Circus of the Other.

TIM

[High-strung giggling] No, no, no, no, no. No, we haven't—

There hasn't **been** a Circus statement since Leanne Denikin's last year, and **that** was a dead end! There's... *someone* would have told me.

MARTIN

Tim, you've been out of it for a while.

TIM

[Not entirely stable] Someone should have told me!

MARTIN

Why?

[DEEP BREATHS FROM TIM]

Tim, are you alright?

TIM

Turn it off.

MARTIN

What?

TIM

[Shouting] Turn it o—

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

MARTIN

Please, Tim.

TIM

No.

MARTIN

He *needs* to hear it.

TIM

I don't care.

MARTIN

He can't help if he doesn't know.

TIM

I don't want his help, Martin.

MARTIN

Elias seems to think that he's the best chance that we have to stop them.

TIM

And what? I'm supposed to just *trust* Elias now?

MARTIN

Please.

TIM

[Exhales] Fine. Fine. I'll tell him in person, when he gets back from... wherever it is that he's vanished to.

MARTIN

China. And if you try to tell him in person, you'll just end up at each other's throats. You *know* you will.

TIM

...

[Bitterly] Statement of Timothy Stoker, on the disappearance of... of my brother, Danny, four years ago. June 14th, 2017.

MARTIN

Thank you.

TIM

Statement begins.

TIM (STATEMENT)

My little brother Danny, he was always better than me. He was a couple of years younger, but by the time he hit 21 he was already taller, fitter, better looking. I mean, he didn't have my winning sense of humour, but he didn't need it. Charisma, it wasn't a problem for him. I think a lot of people in my situation would have been... jealous, but not me. I was just proud of him. He was always doing some, some charity race or endurance course, getting modelling gigs, while I worked quietly away in publishing. And it made me smile.

I remember, he actually got a job doing some publicity shots for the company that owned my local gym. There was a good five months where, whenever I walked down to my offices, there he'd be, twice as large as life, smiling down from a poster, and challenging me to take them up on their joining fee, or lack thereof. I never did, but it always brought a smile to my face when I saw it.

We didn't really talk much, me and Danny. We were still pretty close, and he'd usually keep me updated on whatever his latest obsession was. He tended to throw himself into a thing completely for about six months, and well, then he'd get bored, and something new would catch his eye. Like, um, back in 2013, it was urban exploration. He'd come down to London, stay with me for a couple of days and we'd end up having drinks with, er, Abigail Ellison, who's a mutual friend of ours from back home. Abi had been doing the

urban exploration thing on and off for a few years, and was telling us a few of her 'close calls' in some of the sites down near the old Docklands. As she talked, I was just watching Danny's eyes light up, and I knew exactly what was happening. His passion for sailing was starting to wane after almost a year, and I was sure I was watching him discover his next project. When Abi mentioned she had a trip lined up for the old Millennium Mills in Newham, well, it was pretty much a done deal. At the time I quite liked the idea. It wasn't the *weirdest* thing to ever catch Danny's attention, not by a long shot, and secretly I thought he and Abigail would maybe make kind of a cute couple, so I was quite encouraging. Not that he needed it.

It's weird, isn't it, the things that can change your life? You can plan for all the devastating, terrible possibilities you can imagine, and it'll always be those tiny, *unexpected* things that get you. You

know, the things that you never even noticed as they were happening, just... just nudging *everything* into motion. But even if there was a way I could have known, I really don't think I'd be able to have stopped him.

So, for the next few months that was it. My cool little brother was an urban explorer. It suited him, and I got used to my phone buzzing at my office desk as he filled it with pictures of his smiling face in front of some, I don't know, rusted machine or hidden tunnel. He never did get together with Abi, but it only took a couple of trips with her, and he'd learned what he needed. He talked a few of his friends into it, like always, started going on trips further afield. I thought he'd be down in London more than he was, but it turns out there are even more interesting abandoned places up north, and they tend to be less guarded than they

are down here, so that was where he spent most of his time.

There was one thing that did draw him down to London though, what he referred to as “ghost buildings”. There might have been some official name in the urban exploration community, I don’t know; he stopped using the jargon around me after I joked that ‘urbex’ sounded like a brand of drain cleaner. What he was talking about was the places where newer buildings had been constructed in or, I don’t know, *over* the remains of an earlier one, but development had left some of the old pieces intact. Sometimes, it was just a wall or two, made out of a different material, but occasionally there’d be an entire hidden basement or bricked up room. I don’t know why, but Danny loved them. He’d talk for hours about “crumbling pieces of history desperately clinging onto existence”, but to be honest I never really got it. I

guess I didn't have to. Anyway, according to him, London had more of these 'ghost buildings' than anywhere else in the country.

He'd been exploring for a few months when he first mentioned Covent Garden Theatre. It had been destroyed by fire twice since it was first built in 1732, and well, he was convinced that the current building stood on top of floors and floors of hidden and abandoned ruins, "the discarded cocoons of its previous life" as he once put it. He showed me maps and measurements, a few photo sets from others who'd apparently been there before. I never asked him to, but well, when he was excited, he just wanted everyone else to share it. That was... that was Danny. He was just... like that. While he was talking about the second Theatre Royal in Covent Garden, the one that lasted less than fifty years before it burned down,

that was when I first heard the name Robert Smirke.

All through this, I was trying to talk him out of going because, well, what had *once* been the Covent Garden Theatre is nowadays known as the Royal Opera House, which is about as far from an abandoned building as you can get. And I really didn't think that trespassing there would be a good idea. But Danny didn't want to hear it. He wasn't going into the main building, he told me, and had figured out a route he claimed would lead him into the abandoned levels below without crossing anywhere that might actually attract security. And he was going alone, so he didn't need to worry about attracting too much attention. I told him it was a bad idea, but I'd never been able to stand in the way of his confidence. So late on Wednesday night in August 2013, my little brother went to break into the

ruins hidden under the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden. It sounds so ridiculous to say it out loud, but there it is.

I don't know how long he was gone. I went to bed around one in the morning, and he hadn't gotten back. It was a hot night, and I woke up a few hours later needing a glass of water. There were the first hints of dawn filtering in through my living room windows, giving it this quiet, otherworldly feeling. Danny was sat in my big armchair, completely still. I smiled, feeling suddenly a little bit unsettled, and trying my best to hide it. I'd asked how it had been, but he didn't answer. I asked him if he'd found anything, and he nodded slowly. I saw as he tilted his head that his cheeks were just wet with tears. He mumbled something then, very quietly, and I couldn't really make it out, but it sounded like the name 'Joey'. It was all kind of surreal, strange, and I started to

think I might be dreaming, but I'd never seen him cry before. I tried to talk to him, find out what was wrong, but he just kept shaking his head. We sat there in silence for a *long* time. I didn't know what to do; the whole situation was so alien. I thought maybe I could try and get him some rest, let him collect himself, so after some coaxing, I got him onto the couch. As he laid down, I heard him say something else. I thought it sounded like "the show must go on", and at that moment, you know, I actually thought that was a good sign. I watched for a few more minutes until he was asleep, and then I went back to bed, though it was a while before I fell back to sleep.

That night was the last time I ever saw Danny. When I woke up a few hours later, he was gone. He left no note, no hint of where he may have gone, and the only thing that showed he'd been back at all were a small pile of sketches he'd

drawn on some scrap paper from my printer. On each there was a clown, the same clown. A shock of dark hair, vertical on the top of his head, porcelain white face, bright red lips painted in a wide, pointed smile, and a crimson diamond running down each cheek from just below his eyes. The lips may have been smiling, but the mouth my brother had drawn was dark, an empty circle that made me feel cold.

I should have called the police. Well, maybe not, now I've met some of the ones who've dealt with these cases. But I shouldn't have followed him. I shouldn't have checked the notes Danny left about where to get in, and what to watch out for en route. There was never really any hope for me, though, was there? This was how it was always going to go.

Danny's notes were very comprehensive, and finding the entrance to the old, disused part under the Royal Opera House wasn't nearly as difficult as I thought it might be. He hadn't reattached the chain he'd broken to get in, and it didn't look like anyone had noticed to replace it. The entrance stood open, and even though it was the middle of the day, it became almost completely dark as soon as it crossed the threshold. I think he must have done some work on the hinges too, because even though I could see the rust eating through them, the door opened in complete silence. I stepped inside.

Back then I didn't know enough about Robert Smirke's architecture to recognise his work; I just thought it was a really well-preserved sub-level. The corridors were wide and solid, and my torch showed columns that were that regular geometry that I've come to recognise. Compared to the

summer heat outside, the air was cold. I found myself shivering in just my T-shirt and shorts. The whole place looked spotless, a lot cleaner than any pictures I've ever seen of urban exploration or abandoned sites. I couldn't really see why the Royal Opera House above wouldn't use this space, why they'd just let it sit here untouched and hidden behind a locked and unmarked steel door just off of James Street. I was still wondering about this when I walked into the auditorium.

At the time I wasn't exactly sure what I was looking at, but I've now seen pictures of the second Theatre Royal in Covent Garden, the one designed by Smirke, and I can say it was identical. A perfect recreation of the old stage and tiered seats, the decorations and the boxes. There were only two differences: that it was almost twenty feet below the ground where the original stage was, and that everything, from the floor, to the

seats, to the blank and faceless audience was *entirely* hewn out of crude stone. There was no light except for the headlamp I had taken from my brother's pack and it swept over a full house, four levels of unmoving stone watchers, two thumb-sized indentations focused towards the stage. There was nothing that indicated they were any newer than the rest of the place.

I walked down the steps to the edge of the top level, where I'd entered, and I looked down towards the stage. My lamp barely illuminated the single figure that stood on it. [Deep exhalation] It was Danny. At least, I, I think it was. It looked like him; the same hair, the same clothes, but there was something not right about how he looked. Like he was smaller, somehow, slightly folded in on himself. It didn't matter; I shouted down to him, to let him know I was there. He didn't look up, but when my voice echoed around

the stone theatre, I knew I'd made a horrible mistake.

From somewhere above me, a spotlight suddenly turned on, shining down onto the stage, painfully bright against the white stone. The air became uncomfortably hot, and there was some sort of music. The spotlight wasn't on Danny. Instead, it picked out a figure crouched in the corner. All ruffles, and polka dots, and tights. A clown. It crouched and contorted in the corner, hands backwards over its face, but not so much that I couldn't see the dark red patterns that seemed to flow down its eyes. I couldn't move.

Slowly, so slowly, its right arm reached out towards Danny. It placed its hand on the floor with a long, low groan, then pulled itself along the floor, the fabric of its colourful dress scraping the rough stone of the stage, and its cheek rubbing

against the ground, leaving a trail of red behind it. Then it was still for a second, before a leg reached out in front, and it began to drag the rest of the clown behind it.

I always tell myself there was some force there. Something that held me in place and meant that all I could do was watch. But sometimes when I think back, I remember how my legs shook, and maybe I could move. Maybe I'm just a coward.

The clown reached my brother, who still hadn't moved an inch, and unfurled to its full height. The red on the cheeks was now clearly blood, and something black oozed down from its shock of hair. It took Danny by the hand and looked up, right at me, smiling like nothing has ever smiled since. "Shall I?" he asked, with a voice so full of playful mischief that I felt bile rise in my throat. I

wanted to shake my head, say no, but I never got a chance.

With a single, smooth motion, like whipping the tablecloth off in a restaurant, he pulled the skin off of whatever had been pretending it was my brother. I don't know how to describe it. It was like an impressionist painting of a dancer, all colours and shapes that made you feel movement you couldn't see. Silently, imperceptibly, moving from one position to another. The music had stopped and the dance was silent. It was beautiful.

The next thing I remember was the cool night air on my face, as the opera house patrons pushed past me to get into the evening performance of *Tosca*. In my hands I held an old black and white circus flyer. It was written all over in Cyrillic, but in the bottom left corner was a certain clown's

face, leering out at me, billed as the guest performer. As I watched, it crumbled to ash, and floated away on the breeze.

MARTIN

That was the last time you ever saw your brother?

TIM

Yeah.

MARTIN

You never went back?

TIM

To the auditorium? No. If I had, I... I don't think they'd let me leave a second time.

MARTIN

That's why you joined the Institute, isn't it?

TIM

I thought I might be able to find something about what happened, but... I guess at some point I stopped seriously looking, and started to just... get comfortable.

MARTIN

Until Jon...

TIM

Until the Archives, yeah.

MARTIN

...

Tim, the, the clown that you described is—

TIM

Yeah, I know. It didn't take too much looking around to match the description of Victorian London's most famous clown

[MARTIN SIGHS]

Joseph Grimaldi. A Covent Garden theatre regular.

MARTIN

I mean, 200 years *is* a long time, but...

TIM

Yeah, it's him though. Or it looks like him. Or his ghost or something. I don't know why, but... I think he's with the Russian circus.

MARTIN

Yeah.

TIM

You're reckon they're trying to what, end the world?

MARTIN

I mean maybe it's not... yeah, I think so.

TIM

And no one told me.

MARTIN

You were never here to tell, Tim.

TIM

Well, I am now! I don't care about the rest of it, if anyone's going to find that Circus, I'm coming too. You're not going to stop me!

MARTIN

I mean, sure, sure, I think that's actually a good
i—

[THE DOOR OPENS]

ELIAS

Knock, knock.

TIM

[Sighs] Great.

MARTIN

Oh.

ELIAS

Martin, would you give us a moment?

MARTIN

I... uh...

ELIAS

Please.

MARTIN

Uh, right, um, s-sorry, Tim.

[THE DOOR CLOSES]

TIM

You were watching then?

ELIAS

Most of it.

TIM

Surprised you didn't know it already. That's your *thing*, isn't it?

ELIAS

I knew there was *some* trauma that drew you to us, but I can't say I ever thought to look much deeper. An oversight, perhaps, but I'm looking now.

TIM

All right, hit me with your X-ray eyes then, boss. What do you see?

ELIAS

Disruption. An unpredictable, angry man with nothing left but the desire to feel in some way revenged.

TIM

[Sarcastic] Ooh, terrifying! Surely only magic could have let you see so deep inside my very soul.

ELIAS

Tim, I'm only going to tell you this once. Please stay away from The Unknowing, the Circus, all of it. I don't believe you can help, and I don't know what will happen if you get involved.

TIM

Oh sure. I'll just forget about it. Go back to sulking in a corner.

ELIAS

Tim.

TIM

Don't worry about me, boss, I'll just stop. It's what I'm best at, right? Don't want to get in the way of your evil plans, do I?

ELIAS

I mean it, Tim.

TIM

[Incensed] Oh, oh, you mean it? Oh well, that's different. Okay, well, let me tell you what. If you want me to ignore everything that's going on, forget my brother and everything that's happened over the last two years, how about you kill me?

ELIAS

...

I don't want it to come to that.

TIM

Well, me either. But here we are. So my proposal for you is this: either kill me or fuck off.

ELIAS

...

I'll come back when you're feeling more...
reasonable.

TIM

Then I guess I'll see you in hell.

[ELIAS LEAVES]

[Upon noticing the tape recorder] Oh piss off.

[CLICK]