

#0161301

VIGILO-OPPERIOR-AUDIO
1818



MAGNUS INSTITUTE
LONDON

STATEMENT

Herne, Naomi - January 13th 2016

Alone

Alright. I guess the beginning would be when I met Evan. I've never really been the social type. I've always been more comfortable alone, you know? My father died when I was 5 years old and my mother spent so much time working to keep us fed that I hardly ever saw her. I wasn't bullied in school or anything like that. I mean, to be bullied you need to be noticed and I made sure that I wasn't. It was the same in secondary school and even in uni up at Leeds. When everyone was moving out into shared houses for second year, I stayed in a nice cosy room for one in university accommodation. I've always just been happier alone.

Well, maybe happier isn't quite the right word. I did get a bit lonely sometimes. I'd hear laughter coming from other rooms in my building or see a group of friends talking in the sun outside and maybe I'd wish I had something like that, but it never really bothered me. I knew my own company and was comfortable with it. I didn't need other people, and they certainly didn't need me. The only person who ever really seemed to worry about it was Pastor David. He worked in the Chaplaincy, and I saw him occasionally when work or stress was getting to me. My mum's a Methodist, and I felt more comfortable talking to him than any of the secular counsellors. He used to tell me it wasn't natural for people to live in isolation, that we were creatures of community by nature. I remember he always used to say that he was "worried I'd get lost". Back then, I didn't know what he meant. I think I do now, though. Anyway, the point is that when I graduated three years ago, I left Leeds with a first in Chemistry and no real friends to speak of. And that was fine by me.

Ah, the joys of Academia!

I got a job as a science technician down in Woking. It didn't pay well, and the children were a thick, entitled lot, but it was enough to live on and kept me close enough to London that I could apply for the various lab jobs that I actually wanted. It was interviewing for one of these where I met Evan. He was going for the same position as I was – lab assistant in one of the UCL Biochemistry departments. He got the job, in the end, but I didn't care. He was so unlike anyone I'd ever met before. He started talking to me before the interview, and I amazed myself by actually talking back. When he asked me questions, I didn't feel uneasy or worried about my answers, I just found myself telling this stranger all about myself, without any self-consciousness at all. When he was called in for his interview, I actually felt a pang of loss like nothing I've known before. All for a stranger who I'd met barely ten minutes ago. When I came out of the building after my own, somewhat disastrous, interview and saw him standing there waiting for me... I don't think I've ever been happier than in that moment.

We went out, and dating gradually turned into living together. I'd had two boyfriends in the past – both short-lived relationships that ended abruptly. In both cases they said it was because they never really felt like I wanted them around and, looking back, that was kind of true. With Evan it was different. It never seemed like his being there stopped me being myself or crossed into spaces that I saw as my own. Everything about being with him felt so natural that when he told me he loved me, it only came as a surprise to realise that we hadn't said it already. He had friends, as well, plenty of friends, how could he not? And he would take me out to meet them when I wanted to, and when I didn't, he let me be. After a year with him I actually had what could perhaps be called a social life and, more than that, I didn't hate it. I always used to roll my eyes at people who said that their loved ones 'completed them', but I honestly can't think of any other way to describe how it felt to be with Evan. I proposed to him after only two years, and he said yes.

Charming
I'll skip over the bit where he dies. It's only been a year, and I don't want to spend an hour crying into your crappy tape player. Congenital, they said. Some problem with his heart. Always been there, but never diagnosed. No warning. One in a million chance. Blah, Blah, Blah. He was gone. Just gone. And I was alone again.

There was no-one I could talk to about it. All my friends had been his friends, and once he was gone it didn't feel right to see them. I know, I'm sure they wouldn't have minded, they would have said they were my friends too, but I could never bring myself to try. It felt more comfortable, more familiar, to be alone, as though Evan had just been some wonderful dream that I was now waking up from.

I don't remember the week between his death and the funeral. I'm sure it must have happened, but I don't have any memory of it at all. After leaving the hospital, the next thing that is properly clear in my mind is walking into that big, austere house. I don't remember where it was, somewhere in Kent, I think, and I must have been given the address by someone in Evan's family who had organised the funeral. It was strange. Evan never really talked about his family. He said he wasn't on good terms with them because they were very religious, and he never had been. I'd never met or visited them, or even been told their names, as far as I remember. But they must have known me enough to invite me, as I somehow ended up at the right place. Just as well they took on the responsibility for the funeral. I was in no fit state to organise anything.

The house was very large, and very old. It had a high gate separating it from the main road, which has the name "Moorland House" carved into the stone of the gatepost. I drove there alone, my old, second-hand Vauxhall Astra complaining all the way. You remember that storm that hit at the end of last March? Well, I hardly noticed it. Thinking back, I really shouldn't have been driving at all, but at the time it barely registered. The trees were bending ominously when I finally parked at Moorland House, and I immediately lost the only respectful hat that I owned to the wind. Evan had once told me that his family had a lot of money, and looking at this place, I realised why the funeral was being held there. I could see round the side what appeared to be a well-kept mausoleum. The last resting place of Evan's ancestors, and soon, I guessed, of Evan himself. This thought set me crying again, and it was in that state, weeping, windswept and soaked through from the rain, that I saw the door open.

I don't know what I expected from Evan's father. I knew he couldn't be anything like the easy, charming man I'd fallen in love with, but the hard-faced stranger that confronted me on the doorstep still came as a shock. It was like looking at Evan, but as if age had drained all the joy and affection from him. I started to introduce myself, but he just shook his head and pointed inside, to a door down the corridor behind him, and spoke the only words he ever said to me. He said, "My son is in there. He is dead." And then he turned and walked away, leaving me shaken, with no option but to follow him inside.

The house was full of people I didn't know. None of the lovely, welcoming faces I'd come to know from Evan's friends could be seen among the dour figures of his family. Each wore the same hard expression as his father, and I might have been imagining it, but I could have sworn that when they looked at me, their eyes were full of something dark. Anger, maybe? Blame? God knows I felt guilty enough about his death, though I have no idea why. None of them spoke to me or to each other, and the house was so quiet and still that at times it seemed like I could hardly breathe under the weight of the silence.

Finally, I came to the room where he was laid out. Evan, the man I was going to marry, was lying there in a shining oak casket that seemed too big for him, somehow. The coffin was open, and I could see him, dressed in a perfectly tailored black suit. I realised I had never seen him wear a suit before. Like everything else in his death, it seemed utterly alien to the life that he had created for himself. I remember going to my father's funeral when I was very young. I remember seeing him lying there, after the undertakers had done their business. My father had looked serene, peaceful, like he had calmly accepted the reality of his passing. It had comforted me, as a child, though it had done little to blunt the acute sense of loss that I felt. There was none of that on Evan's face. In death he seemed to

have that same hardness and reproach that I saw on every one of the silent family that claimed him for their own.

*Where do I know the name Lukas from?
Did Elias mention them? Will need to have a word.*

I don't know how long I stood there. It felt like seconds, but when I turned around I almost shrieked to see dozens of black-clad figures stood there, staring at me. The rest of the Lukas family were standing, waiting without a word, as though I was between them and their prey. Which I suppose, in some ways, I was. Finally, an old man walked forward. He was small and hunched with age, his black suit hanging off his body like sagging flaps of skin. He spoke, "It's time for you to leave. The burial is a family affair. I'm sure you want to be alone."

I tried to reply, but the words stuck in my throat. They stood there, waiting for me to respond or to leave, and I realised the old man was right. I did want to leave, to be alone. I didn't care where I went, but I had to go, to get away from that awful place with its strange quiet watchers. I ran past them and out into the storm. Inside my car, I just turned on the engine and began to drive. I didn't know where I was going and could barely see a thing through my tears and the driving rain, but it didn't matter. Just as long as I kept going, as long as I didn't have to stop and think about what had just happened. Looking back, the only thing that surprises me about the crash is that it wasn't bad enough to kill me.

When I became aware of myself again, I realised I was in the middle of a field, quite a distance from the road. The tracks behind me showed where I had skidded into the dirt. Luckily, I hadn't hit anything or flipped over, but smoke billowed from the engine of my poor old Astra, and it was clear I wasn't going anywhere. It was dark, and the time on my dashboard said twelve minutes past eleven. My phone said the same thing. I had arrived at Moorland House at 6 o'clock, as instructed. Had I been driving for hours, or had I spent even longer with Evan's body than I thought? I hadn't hit anything, so I couldn't have been knocked unconscious. Had I just been sitting there in my smoking car all that time?

but probably enough for a nasty concussion?

It didn't matter. The rain was beating down hard, and I needed to get some help. I tried to call the emergency services or use the GPS on my phone, but the screen just said "NO SERVICE". I took a deep breath, trying to stifle panic, and got out the car. I was soaked through in less than ten seconds, as I struggled through the downpour towards the road. I could hear no sound except for the howling wind, and there were no headlights anywhere to be seen. Having no idea where I was, I made the decision to turn right and began to walk. I tried to use my phone again, but as I reached into my bag I realised how much of the rain had soaked through. Pressing the power button only confirmed what I already suspected – my phone wasn't working. Anger washed over me, and all the bitterness and rage that had been building over the worst days of my life surged of me, and I threw the useless lump of plastic at the ground. The corner shattered as it hit the road, then it bounced off the side and disappeared into the thick mud.

I suddenly felt very cold as I stood there in the road. Rain beating down, tears flowing freely, and utterly alone. I kept walking, desperately hoping to see headlights in the distance, but there was nothing but darkness and the steady pounding of the rain on miles of empty countryside in every direction. I didn't have a watch, so without my phone I have no idea how long I walked. The cold bit into my soaked funeral clothes and I shivered, falling to my knees and just about giving up. No cars were coming, and I didn't have the first clue where I was going.

It was then I noticed that the rain had stopped. Wiping the tears from my eyes, I saw that a fog had gathered around me, and I could no longer see more than a few feet in front of me. I kept walking, though, as the clinging mist made me feel somehow even colder. The fog seemed to follow me as I went and seemed to swirl around with a strange, deliberate motion. You'll probably think me an idiot, but

it felt almost malicious. I don't know what it wanted, but somehow I was sure it wanted something. There was no presence to it, though, it wasn't as though another person was there, it was... It made me feel utterly forsaken. I started to run, following as much of the road as I could see in the hopes of getting to the other side, but there seemed to be no end to it.

I don't know exactly when the hard tarmac of the road became dirt and grass, but I realised after a few minutes that I had strayed off the path. I tried to backtrack, but it was gone. All that remained was the fog, and the skeletal outlines of half-glimpsed trees. The dark lines of them bent away from me at harsh angles, but if I tried to approach them then, rather than becoming clearer, the trees would disappear back into the hazy night and I would lose them. Kneeling down, I was surprised to realise that the ground I was now standing on was not wet. The hard-packed earth was damp from the creeping mist, but it did not appear to have been rained on. The despair I felt was quickly turning into fear, and I kept moving forward, further into the fog.

I realised afterwards that the night should have been far too dark to see the fog. There were no lights there to show it, and the moon had been shrouded in storm clouds all night, but despite this I could clearly see it. Shifting, slate-grey and smelling of nothing at all. As I walked, I saw more shapes nearby. Dark slabs of stone, sticking out of the ground, leaning and broken. Gravestones. They spread out in all directions, and the gentle blurring of the mist did nothing to soften the hard weight of their presence. I did not stop to read them.

A graveyard that old might not be marked on current maps. Without more location information, we can't easily follow it up.

I kept moving until I reached the centre of what I can only assume was a small cemetery, and there I found a chapel. The top of its steeple was lost in the gloom, and the windows were dark. I started to feel relief, as though I might have found some sign of life at last. I began to circle it, moving around to where I assumed the front doors were. As I went, I noticed that there was stained glass in the windows but, without any light from inside, I couldn't make out the design. Finally, I came to front of the building, and I almost lost hope. Wrapped around the handles of the entrance was a sturdy iron chain. I would find no sanctuary here.

As opposed to speeding grief-stricken through the rain in a Vauxhall Astra?

I came very close to making a rash decision at that point. I started to shout, to scream for help, but the sound seemed muffled and disappeared almost as soon as it left my throat. No-one heard me, but I continued shouting for some time, just to hear the noise, even if it did seem to die as soon as it touched the fog. It was useless, though, and as I finished, I felt the prickling damp flow in and out of my lungs. It was cloying and heavy and I decided I had to do something. I started to look around the ground for the heaviest rock I could find. I was going to get inside that church, even if I had to break a window to do it. Anything to get out of the fog. I was sure that eventually someone would find me.

I noticed that one of the graves had been slightly broken by age, and a small chunk of it could be seen on the ground. It had an engraving of a cross on it, and the weighty lump of stone now lay embedded in the graveyard soil. I bent down to lift it, but as I did so, I saw something that froze me in place. The grave was open – and it was empty. It wasn't dug up, exactly. The hole was neat, square and deep, as though ready for a burial. At the bottom there was a coffin. It was open, and there was nothing inside. I backed away, and almost fell into another open grave behind me. I started to look around the cemetery with increasing panic. Every grave was open, and they were all empty. Even here among the dead, I was alone.

As I stared, the fog began to weigh me down. It coiled about me, its formless damp clung to me and began to drag pull me gently, slowly, towards the waiting pit. I tried to back away, but the ground was

slick with dew and I fell. My fingers dug into the soft cemetery dirt as I looked around desperately for anything I could use to save myself, and my hand closed upon that heavy piece of headstone. It took all my self-control to keep a grip on that anchor, as I slowly dragged myself away from the edge of my lonely grave. Flowing around me, the very air itself willed me inside, but I struggled to my feet. The image of Evan's family suddenly came into my mind, and I vowed to myself that they would not be the last human contact I ever had.

I looked towards the chapel and saw with a start that the door was now open, the heavy chain discarded on the steps in front. I ran to it as quickly as I could, crying out for help, but when I reached the threshold I stopped, and could only stare in horror. Through that door, where the inside of the chapel should be, was a field. It was bathed in sickly moonlight, and the fog rolled close to the ground. It seemed to stretch for miles, and I knew that I could wander there for years, and never meet another. I turned away from that door, but as I looked behind me, I could have wept – beyond the graveyard's edge lay that same field, stretching off into the distance.

I had to make a choice, and so I began to run from that chapel, into the field behind me. I nearly fell into a hungry grave but kept my balance well enough to get beyond them. The fog seemed to be getting thicker, and moving through it was getting harder. It was like I was running against the wind, except the air was completely still. I could hardly breathe as I inhaled it. And then, as I found myself in the middle of that open, desolate field, I heard something. It was the strangest thing, but as I tried to run, I could have sworn I heard Evan's voice call to me. He said, "Turn left". That's it. That's all he said. I know it sounds ridiculous, but that's what he told me to do. And I did it. I turned sharply to the left and kept on running. And then... nothing.

[Archivist] That's when the car hit you?

Yes. I remember a second of headlights and then nothing until I woke up in the hospital.

This statement was recorded directly by Ms. Herne and later transcribed. There were the usual audio problems, so the tape recorder was used, despite Ms. Herne's misgivings. When she had finished, she asked me if I thought what she had experienced was real.

I said we'd need to do some investigation into a few of the details that she raised, but told her that my first impression was that it was only real insofar as trauma can have a very real effect on the mind. Beyond that, it would be difficult to prove either way, but I suggested that she leave the stone with us, so we could study it. I also mentioned that some time with a more qualified care professional might prove helpful. She was not best pleased with my reply; I can only hope she finds the help she needs to move on.

Following Ms Herne's statement, we did as much follow-up as we were able, which admittedly wasn't a lot. Evan Lukas did indeed pass away from heart failure on March the 22nd 2015, and his body was taken by his family for burial. All requests to the Lukas family for information or interviews have been very firmly rebuffed.

At roughly one in the morning on the 31st of March, Ms. Herne was involved in a collision with one Michael Getty. She had apparently run out into the road in front of Mr. Getty's car near Wormshill in the Kent Downs. She was quickly taken to Sittingbourne hospital and treated for concussion and dehydration. Her car was found abandoned in a field five miles away.

There are no cemeteries matching Ms. Herne's description anywhere near the road she was found, nor could there have been any fog, given the incredibly high winds during the storm that night. I'd be tempted to chalk this one up to a hallucination from stress and trauma, if it wasn't for the fact that when she was hit, Ms. Herne was found to be holding a piece of masonry. It appears to be a lump of carved granite with an engraved cross design. The size and style match what would conceivably be found atop a headstone, though we have been unable to trace its origin. Still attached to it is a small fragment of what we can assume would have been the marker itself. The only text that can be made out simply reads 'forgotten'. I've arranged for it to be transferred to the Institute's artefact storage.

Moorland House (from 'Kentish Houses' by M. Drummond, 1924)



Piece of granite provided
by Ms. Herne