

## **MAG – 099 – Dust to Dust**

### **Content Warnings:**

- Suffocation
- Undead
- Natural disaster
- Abduction
- Claustrophobia
- Violence

**[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro]**

**JONATHAN SIMS**

Rusty Quill presents: The Magnus Archives. Episode ninety-nine. Dust to dust.

**[Tape clicks on.]**

**GERTRUDE**

Case 9522002 - Robert E. Geiger. Incident occurred in Boise City, Oklahoma, April 1935. Victim's name given as Stefan Brotchen. Statement given 20th of February 1952. Committed to tape 2nd of September 2007. Gertrude Robinson recording.

**GERTRUDE (STATEMENT)**

I read somewhere once I was the first man to use the term “Dust Bowl”. Now, that's not so. Maybe the first the boys in the New York office had heard, but down in Oklahoma it wasn't too unusual a turn of phrase. Wide, flat, open

spaces... You could see a storm coming for miles, coming straight at you all across the horizon, looking near as anything like the end of the world.

Those were bad days. Worse than anyone knows. Did my best to spread the word, filed my copy with the AP, but there was plenty I never did find the words for. There were things in the dust that I never told to a soul. It's why I decided to step in on you folks. I still wish there was a place like this back home, but the way things are going they'd be up in front of Congress, likely as not, so maybe it's for the best.

You know much about dust pneumonia? Don't know why you would do, really. There isn't much of it about these days. Wasn't back then, either, at least before the storms came. Then there was plenty. The name makes it sound more complicated than it is. You see, 'dust pneumonia' is just a medical way of saying your lungs are full of mud. Too much goes in, you see, and it clogs up all the bits of your chest that should clear them out. There's fever, difficulty breathing, infection... The dust mixes with the moisture of your insides, and soon enough you're drowning, your lungs packed solid with mud and mucus.

Awful thing to happen to anybody, but that's what the dust storms were. Great chunks of earth torn up and hurled across the open plains, desperate to find some poor unsheltered throat and climb inside. They buried you alive, without even giving you the courtesy of getting you below the ground. And I saw so many choking farmers, their dirt-streaked faces seemed to blend together. Watching as their livelihoods evaporated with the rain. As their farms, their homes, their lives collapsed into dirt. It was all a long sepia blur: weather-beaten faces caked in that same patina of misery and grit. All except for Stefan.

Stefan Brotchen was, to all appearances, much the same as any other Okie farmer: strongly built, with a mess of short, curly, blond hair and a round, smiling face. But his eyes were different.

There was... something there. I-I was never quite sure what, but they had a depth, a quiet intensity to them that struck me the first time I saw him. I'd been gathering comment for an AP article on the latest dust storms to hit the area. There'd been a lot of interest nationally after one dust storm made it all the way to Washington, and my editor was keen to get some comment from the people worst hit. So, naturally, I ended up in Boise City.

There was always something odd about that town. Something about it at odds with the land it sat on. Challenged the wide stretches of nothing. I guess that's not a surprise, looking back. I did some research on the place afterwards, you see. Did you know that Boise City was founded by fraud? I mean literal, send-you-to-prison fraud. Yeah, back in 1908, three men decided to start selling the deeds to land they didn't own. They printed up hundreds of brochures: "Come to scenic Boise City! Tree-lined boulevards, all the amenities, even a railroad station, all ready and waiting for brave souls to head out there and settle." And people bought it. Almost three thousand of them. Of course, when they finally arrived to this fabled town, there was absolutely nothing there at all. Just empty, waiting earth. They didn't even own the plots of land they'd been sold. But they stayed, and they built a town. Not a great town, by any stretch. Not even a good town, truth be told, but there it was, in defiance of all good sense.

One of the men who settled in the newly formed Boise City was Stefan Brotchen's father. He was long-dead by the time we met his son. My photographer, a small man named Harry Eisenhard, had been told about the Brotchen farm when asking about places around the area hit bad by the

storms. Stefan's fields had nothing left but dry earth, they told us. Farmhouse stripped almost bare by the harsh winds, his livestock dead and already half-buried, his family gone. Never found out more than that. Just... gone.

When we pulled up that Sunday, the place was everything we'd been told and more. We'd see the top of wheels and farm equipment poking up through the ground, until we realised it wasn't the ground, just a good three feet of newly fallen dirt half-burying the ploughs and wagon. I saw what must once have been a cow, covered from the neck up in coarse and clinging dust. Harry and I had wrapped our handkerchiefs over our faces, as the men back in town had told us, but the air was already thick, and I could hear Harry coughing beside me. I'd seen a few victims of the dust pneumonia by this point, and the sound of his breathing made me press the cloth close to my face, and offer up a silent prayer.

Stefan did not wear a cloth across his face when he came out to meet us, and I could see the fine particles collecting in his hair, in the corners of his eyes. He smiled warmly, and waved us over.

I've tried in the years since to remember if there was anything behind that smile, anything dark or secret that I might have overlooked; there was nothing. The soft, friendly voice was, as far as I can tell, genuine, and as Stefan Brotchen sat there in his small, dusty kitchen, telling us his misfortunes, there was no clue in his face as to what must have been going on inside him.

His story was not unusual, and I'm sure that if you hunted down a copy of the Lubbock Evening Journal from that week there'd be most of it in there. Crops dying, soil parched and a farm on the brink of ruin, all ruled over by that desperate, empty hope of rain. He never mentioned his

family, and I never thought to ask, though the house clearly was far too big for Stefan to live there alone. He offered us a drink at one point, just water, but I couldn't bring myself to accept.

I just had this image playing through my mind over and over again. He stands up, walks over, pulls out a bottle of thick, flowing mud, opens it, and pours it down his throat with a smile on his face. Just my imagination, I told myself. Just letting the dust get to me.

It only took an hour or two before I decided I had enough material for the story, and I stood up, and thanked him for his time. Harry did the same, and I shook Stefan by the hand. As I touched his skin, I almost pulled my hand away it was so hot. It was a dry, feverish heat and I looked at his face and saw for the first time the fierce, flushed redness, the forehead slick with sweat. His chest started to convulse, and he doubled over, spluttering out a clod of pulpy, brown sludge onto the wooden floor. I started to ask if he was okay, but Harry tugged on my arm, gesturing outside with an almost wild urgency. It all seemed to be happening so fast I could barely register what was going on. At least, until I got outside and looked west.

The vast, rolling black clouds stretched before us, as far as we could see. It was coming for us with such a speed that there was a part of me that immediately knew, despite all logic, that it was trying to kill me, and me alone. It was the worst dust storm I had ever seen, and it promised to blot out everything. I ran back inside to warn Stefan, and ask if he had anywhere we could wait it out, but I found him lying on the ground. He was face down, a thin trickle of dirt oozing slowly from his mouth and nose. I called to Harry, told him Stefan needed help, but he could barely hear me over the wind, which was now so fierce that it seemed to drown everything else out.

When I finally made him understand, he seemed none too keen to drive through the storm, and warned me the engine would clog before we got half way back to Boise City. I said we had no choice but to try. If we didn't, then Stefan was already dead.

We covered his face with a cloth, and carried him out and into our small car, laying him into the back as gently as we could. The wind was so sharp it felt like it was trying to strip the flesh from my skull; I had to hold my hand in front of my eyes to keep out the dirt that was whipping around at forty miles an hour. Even with my handkerchief covering my mouth, I could feel the dust creeping in, forming a damp, cloying paste between my teeth. And the storm hadn't even hit yet.

I climbed into the driver's seat, while Harry scuttled round to the passenger side, and with Stefan laid across the back we turned and began the drive back towards town, trying to convince ourselves we had any hope of outrunning the storm.

We did not.

It bore down on us like the judgement from Heaven, and in less than a moment the sun was gone and the sky was black. I tried to keep driving, but I could hear the engine choking, sputtering, and finally coming to an end.

It's hard to describe just how dark it is in the middle of a dust storm. It's not just the lack of sun but that no light can penetrate more than a few feet, before the swirling opaque cloud kills it dead. It's loud, with the wind and the sound of those dry specks of earth blasting against the car, but it's the sort of loud that, after a while, starts to feel a lot like silence. We did our best to plug

up any gaps in the windows or the frame, and keep as much of the dust outside as we could, and then we sat there, feeling for all the world like we were the last people left alive, entombed within our metal coffin.

I tried to say something to Harry, to reassure him, but opening my mouth just invited more dust, and I was already coughing more than enough to panic. So we just sat there, in what felt like silence for over an hour, trying not to think about the storm, or the poor Oklahoma farmer dying on our back seat. We just waited.

At some point Stefan must have finally died. I know this because when he started talking to us again, there was no way he could have made those noises unless his lungs and throat were fully packed with sediment. The words were soft, insistent and spasmed out of his dirt-clogged body like an earthquake. I don't remember what he said, not really. It only comes back to me in those quicksand dreams, where I feel the earth swallowing me forever. He was making promises, I think. Promising us that when the sky fell and became an eternity of mud, he would carve out a place for us in the heart of the forever buried. He would show us... the love of 'Choke'.

I still couldn't see anything, but I felt his hand on my face, hot and dry and rough, and I tried to scream, but it just let in more dust. Harry did scream, though, and I could hear a struggle going on beside me, grunts and the sounds of flesh striking soil, then the sound of a car door opening, and the sudden rush of wind and grit. And then it closed abruptly, and I once again sat in the unmoving quiet of the car. Except this time, I was alone.

I never saw Harry Eisenhard again. When the storm finally passed, I spent hours searching for him, but he was gone. I did find the body of Stefan, though,

about twenty yards away, so encrusted with dirt he barely looked human anymore. Black Sunday, they called that storm, and

Harry was a long way from its only casualty. He got lost in the shuffle, officially mourned by the staff of the Associated Press, and then never discussed again. I wish I could say more about him, but honestly, I hadn't worked with the man very much. All I know is that he was taken by Stefan Brotchen, and that it happened after Brotchen was dead. When all that made him human was suffocated, and the only thing left to move and speak inside him was that terrible killing dust.

### **GERTRUDE**

**(Sighs)** Hmm. Final comments.

Based on the history of Boise City and its deceptive roots, I would perhaps have expected some aspect of the Spiral to be at work here, but its unique position at the centre of the Dust Bowl does seem heavily to indicate another power overtly at work. I have had my suspicions about where to be focusing my efforts, and the nature of the pseudo-prophecies given by the dust inside Stefan Brotchen seems to confirm them. To that end, I've been examining fault lines and seismic data for—

**[Knocking on door]**

**(Gertrude groans.)**

### **GERTRUDE**

**(Adopts a somewhat fraailer voice)** Hello?

**[Door opens]**

**MICHAEL**

Ah, Miss Robinson, I, um, I found Mr. Vargas' statement that you asked for. Well, uh, I found the translation. I, I already had the original but, y'know, I, I, I didn't think you'd want it in Spanish. (**Nervous chuckles**) U-U-Unless you speak Spanish?

**GERTRUDE**

(**Somewhat sharply**) I do not. And thank you Michael.

**MICHAEL**

Sure. Um, well, was, was there anything else you needed?

**GERTRUDE**

Um... No, no. Not at the moment. Thank you.

**GERTRUDE**

Right, well, if you need me, uh, they're installing that climate-controlled storage... that thing o-oover the weekend, so I'm, I'm, y'know, I'm just getting all that together.

**GERTRUDE**

Yes! Yes, I remember.

**MICHAEL**

Right. Well, call me if you need anything.

**GERTRUDE**

Thank you, Michael, I will.

[Door closes]

**(Normal voiced)** Right. These additional researches have further cemented my belief that North America is going to be the focal point for the Buried. Now it's just a matter of narrowing down the specifics of geography, and that may just come down to monitoring the right movement of supplies and people. I'm still not completely sold on the US for the Hunt, but that's unlikely to be quite as urgent. For the Buried, however, I do have what I believe might be quite an effective plan forming. Assuming, of course, that my suspicions about Jan Kilbride are correct, and that's something that should be easy enough to determine once he's back on Earth. Considering what's probably happened to him up there already, I feel almost... bad, but there's ten years yet before I can afford a conscience.

[Tape clicks off. Tape clicks on.]

### ARCHIVIST

I, um... I... Right. Right, I— My head is... That was Michael. It-It was... It was Michael. H-how... How was it Michael? He— It... It never... Gertrude knew Michael. He was one of her assistants, but, but, but that doesn't make any sense.

The thing that calls itself Michael, it-it-it doesn't seem like it was ever human. So what happened to the real Michael? Did— I mean that's not really a question, is it? He's dead, and it's probably because of Gertrude. I still can't figure out whose side she was actually on. Or even if she was playing the same game. Doesn't matter. Everyone who came close to her... seems like it... it

went badly. Her assistants, Gerard, Leitner, Elias, though I don't think Gertrude had anything to do with his going rotten. But Michael... Did it take that form just to mock me? Knowing that at-at some point I'd look deeper into Gertrude?

WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU?

No. No, never when you call.

Just one door. So many of these stories, these, these people touched by... Once you're on the path to becoming a monst— an avatar, it looks like it gets more and more unhealthy to be around you. (**Heavy sigh**) I think... I think I need to lea—

[Door opens]

**GEORGIE**

Uh, John, did you call me? I was in the studio, but I thought I heard you shouting.

**ARCHIVIST**

Oh, uh, no it's a false alarm.

**GEORGIE**

Okay, uh, sure. You alright?

**ARCHIVIST**

Yeah, I... Look, look, I've been thinking—

**GEORGIE**

Are you sure? You look a bit—

**ARCHIVIST**

No, I'm fine!

**GEORGIE**

No, really, you're really sweating.

**ARCHIVIST**

Look, G-Georgie, I need to move out.

**GEORGIE**

Umm... yeah. I thought you were looking for a place. Y'know, now, now you've got a salary again.

**ARCHIVIST**

No, I, I mean, now.

**GEORGIE**

What, now now? It's like five in the afternoon.

**ARCHIVIST**

T-Tomorrow, then. I... I-I just... I just don't like staying here.

**GEORGIE**

Well thanks.

**ARCHIVIST**

You know that's not what I mean. I feel like I'm putting you in danger.

**GEORGIE**

Well, yeah. You are. A horrible mannequin thing turned up. Had to change all my lightbulbs.

**ARCHIVIST**

Yeah. This, this is my point!

**GEORGIE**

I said I'm fine with it. At least until you're properly back on your feet. You're not doing well. You keep apologising and saying you're changing, but it's all just the same. If you leave, I think it's just going to get worse, and I don't want that.

**ARCHIVIST**

I do appreci— I mean, I don't... Georgie, you literally can't feel fear! Are you sure that that's not—

**GEORGIE**

Don't! Okay. I'm well aware of my situation. It does not make me an idiot. And it doesn't mean I got a death wish, either.

**ARCHIVIST**

Is it... Why are you so insistent on keeping me around?

**GEORGIE**

Because you're trying to cut yourself off, and that's... that's really bad. Look, when's the last time you spoke to someone who wasn't me?

**ARCHIVIST**

That's... I... I-I- talked to Martin a...a, a few weeks ago...

**GEORGIE**

Did you talk to him? Or did he talk to you, while you tried to find a way to escape?

**ARCHIVIST**

I...

**GEORGIE**

Look, you're worried. I get it. But if you really think you're turning into something... inhuman, you need people around you. You need anchors.

**ARCHIVIST**

All my “anchors” are just as deep in this as me.

**GEORGIE**

Well, you still need them.

**ARCHIVIST**

**(Sigh)** Maybe you're right. I'll talk to the others. Check in properly, see if I can help with the, uh, with Elias' new management style. But I won't stay here. If something happened to you, or, or, god-forbid, the Admiral, because I was here—.

**GEORGIE**

Alright, fine. I mean, you're a grown-ass man, you want to leave, find a hotel, I can't stop you. Just... keep in touch, alright? Y'know, don't be a 'stranger'.

**ARCHIVIST**

Georgie.

**GEORGIE**

Oh come on, that was classic Barker.

**ARCHIVIST**

I'm just not in the mood.

**[Tape clicks off. Tape clicks on. There are sounds of a street.]**

**BREEKON**

'scuse us.

**HOPE**

Are you Jonathan Sims?

**ARCHIVIST**

Yeah, wh—? Oh, sh—

**[The Archivist exclaims & coughs as if punched.]**

**BREEKON**

Miss Orsinov wants to see you.

**HOPE**

She says she changed her mind.

**ARCHIVIST**

No, I-I—

**[A van door slides opens, the Archivist is bundled in breathing heavily. The door slides shut and the engines starts.]**

**ARCHIVIST**

Oh god.

**[Tape clicks off.]**

**[The Magnus Archives Theme – Outro]**

**JONATHAN SIMS**

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