

Intro

You're shopping at the grocery store.

As you walk past an aisle - the lights flicker - then go out.

You're now standing in an arrangement of tall, long stones with strange, glowing carvings across their surface.

Heavy footsteps vibrate from a shadowy stone enclave.

(A beat)

You need my help.

[AVFD music fades in]

This is A Voice From Darkness

[AVFD music fades out]

Hello, and once again welcome to A Voice From Darkness. We've got a packed show tonight - multiple national alerts, an interesting question from a listener that I'll do my best to answer, a longer than normal Today In Odd America segment, and later I'll be talking to returning caller Amanda - who you might remember is haunted by a black door. I'm afraid I recently stood her up after promising a solution to her problems. I'm sure she, as well as you listeners out there - will want an explanation. Stay tuned for the second half of our show for that conversation. But now - why don't we jump right into our first segment - national alerts.

National Alerts

On our last episode, Bob from Minnesota sent in a question about a diner in Montana where the staff and at least some of the customers appeared to be repeating conversations - all of which were scripted. Bob revealed that he saw a copy of the script and he was in it and was supposed to say things he never would. It may not surprise you then that our first national alert this evening is for Montana. Just off I-94 between Miles City and Forsyth there's a diner called Spoon's Favor. Do not stop at this diner. After our last episode I messaged Bob for further information. He provided me the name and location of the diner, however he told me he went back there himself. He eats there everyday now. He has pleasant conversations with the waitress and regulars. He encouraged me to stop by Spoon's Favor myself. He is in the script. The script gives him knowledge and comfort he never had before - he told me. However, I am not in the script, but he's sure they could write me, or anyone else, in. He thinks things will be better off once everyone is in the script - in some way or another. He declined to provide further

information as that's as much as he was scripted to say. I'm still not sure what this script is, if it manifests in other ways outside this Montana diner, but I'll keep you updated as more information is uncovered.

Our second national alert is for my home city of Chicago. The Chicago Spire has once again appeared - do not go into it. For those unfamiliar with the building, it's a skyscraper off Lakeshore Drive that began construction in 2007, but was never finished. Somehow, somehow, the finished building - a spiraling structure that extends 150 stories into the sky - started appearing intermittently in 2012. Usually it only manifests for a few hours, never for more than a day. People have gone into the building - firefighters and other first responders, tourists, the generally curious - no one has ever stepped back out of the building though. The Spire typically waits for at least one person to step inside before disappearing. Don't let it be you.

Quick Questions -

On to our next segment, quick questions - I answer questions you've emailed or tweeted at us. Normally I'd provide our email address and twitter handle for you to send us more questions, however we'll be taking a break after this episode so we won't be taking any more questions at this time. Onto this week's question: Elise writes us: Dr. Ryder, a large hourglass appeared on my dining room table a few days ago. The sand falls at strange intervals. The grains don't continuously pour down at a standard rate, but instead a single grain will come down. Then either a few seconds - or possibly a few minutes - later another grain will. I've tried lifting the hourglass to turn it over but it's impossible. What is the hourglass? Why is it here? And what is it counting down to?

Elise, for the past few centuries there's been written accounts of what you've described. The Ominous Hourglasses - as these timepieces - are traditionally called appear before people to warn them of an upcoming disaster. Carved into the base and columns of the hourglass should be imagery of some kind - falling leaves, snowflakes - something to indicate the season the disaster will occur. There should be other carvings as well to help you figure out what sort of disaster the timepiece is counting down to. Previously, a rifle was carved into one of the columns and counted down to a shooting. That said, there's only a handful of times when the receiver of the hourglass has been able to interpret the carvings and then prevent the disaster. Some believe the carvings have a more cruel meaning - The Fates, in some form, mocking us for trying to know and change the future. That said, if you'd like help attempting to decipher the hourglass carvings - I know a specialist on the topic and I'm sure they'd be happy to help you.

That was our only quick question for this week. Next up, we have an extended edition of Today In Odd America, and then we'll be back with Amanda on the line.

Today In Odd America

Today In Odd America we find ourselves in Davenport, Iowa. The year 1859. James Kheller walked to his tannery shop on River Street as the sun rose. When he neared his place of business he was hit by an unexpected sight. Across the street from his tannery there'd always been an empty lot. A small piece of undeveloped land. But now there stood a two storey brick building. It hadn't been there the previous night when he'd closed shop.

James was taken aback by what seemed an impossible sight. But he approached the strange new structure to get a better sense of what it was.

The brick building had a wide display window and across it were painted three characters. E, W, and between them - an ampersand. As James pondered what the E&W stood for, a man in a grey top hat and matching overcoat came out the front door. "Hello, sir," the man in grey said. "I see you're admiring my shop. Might you like to come inside and see what we have to offer?"

James remained where he stood.

"Your store didn't exist last night," he told the man in grey. The man removed his hat and dusted off the top. As he did James saw the man's left hand was missing its ring finger.

"The Grand Eastern & Western Coffee Company existed in my dreams last night," the man in grey said. "And what Gilman Halifax dreams, becomes true." He stepped closer to James - who in turn instinctively stepped back. He was afraid of this man - Halifax - him and his shop that materialized in the middle of night. Halifax gave a wolfish grin - delighting in James' fear.

"Now sir, I insist you come inside my shop. I insist you start your day - start everyday - with some of my coffee. You'll never find another substance so fine in the waking world."

James was too afraid to refuse the man, and so he followed him in.

Despite its mysterious origins, The Grand Eastern & Western Coffee Company - or E&W as it was more commonly called, was successful. Their coffee was good yet somehow cheaper than every other supplier in the river city. Three previously-existing Davenport coffee shops went out of business within the year - unable to match E&W's prices. Meanwhile E&W opened a second location across the river on the Illinois side in Rock Island. Once again, the shop sprung up overnight. However the citizens of Rock Island were so delighted to have their own E&W they didn't ask too many questions.

Some folks on both the Illinois and Iowa sides of the river complained of sleepless nights. Strange dreams of packing containers with a black sand like substance inside a dark brick warehouse. But no one of prominence had such dreams, and so those who complained went unheard.

Gilman Halifax, despite owning these stores, was rarely seen in Davenport or Rock Island. He kept on the move - always traveling - scouting new locations to expand his operations. Davenport, Iowa was the perfect place for him to start his empire. He was easily able to journey by steamboat north and south on the Mississippi - from Minnesota to Louisiana. E&W's soon populated towns all along the river. In 1869, the transcontinental railroad was finished. The Rock Island railway made it possible to travel virtually anywhere in the country - thus fulfilling the

company's name and promise - Folks from New York City to San Francisco began their mornings with Halifax's coffee.

As E&Ws sprung up, the shops became larger and stocked more items. Sugar and candies, plates, flatware, canned goods. They became convenient locations to do the bulk - if not all - of one's shopping. Other businesses that sold these same items suffered when E&Ws appeared in their towns. The Chicago Dispatch dubbed E&W - the dream of the average consumer, but the nightmare of the small business man. The newspaper ran several critical headlines of E&W and attempted to dig up the history of Halifax. One editorial from the paper went so far as to call E&Ws "...cancerous tumors spreading across the nation - threatening to rob America of its health, entrepreneurial spirit, and everything that made it grand." But Halifax bought the paper. Instead of criticism The Dispatch then carried E&W coupons in every Sunday edition and never again spoke a negative word about the owner or his stores. Halifax would go on to purchase dozens of newspapers. When a paper was too big for him to purchase, he'd often sue it for libel or slander. His cases had little merit, but they had the chilling effect he wanted - newspapers stopped printing his name. That's not to say papers stopped talking of Halifax entirely. No, they became more clever. Editorial cartoons portrayed him as a trickster salesman. The most famous such illustration labeled him "The Traveling Salesman." The nickname stuck.

Despite the declining press coverage, it became impossible for the nation to ignore the plague of nightmares had by so many. Nearly one in a thirty Americans reported terrible and lucid dreams of working all night in dark brick buildings - filling shipping containers with black sand. But the nightmares were not equally distributed across all Americans. Newly freed slaves and immigrant communities, especially those that spoke little or no English, found themselves disproportionately affected by the warehouse and black sand nightmares.

Herman Peake, a man blinded while a slave on a Georgia plantation claimed he couldn't see these nightmares, but could smell them. And they smelled like E&W coffee. He was not the only one to tie E&W to the increasing wave of nightmares.

A lawsuit was raised against The Grand Eastern & Western Coffee Company on behalf of the People of the United States. The case made its way to the Supreme Court. The year was 1880 and Justice Stephen Johnson Field refused to have the court hear the case - claiming that the founding fathers intended for the Constitution to rule over America - not the Land of Nod.

Sleep strikes were waged across the country. Strikers organized into large groups and made sure few were ever asleep at any given time - never enough to do any meaningful work in Halifax's nightmare factories. Alongside the strikes, hundreds of E&Ws were vandalized. The shops nearly destroyed and their wares stolen. In some cases the shop's coffee was used to help the sleep strikers stay awake. In an homage to the Boston Tea Party, coffee from the flagship store in Davenport was thrown into the Mississippi River.

Where the supreme court refused to act, congress felt the need to step in to stop the strikes, vandalism, and wakeful unproductivity that now plagued the nation. Legislation was hastily proposed and passed in both chambers guaranteeing the rights of all Americans to not be forced to perform dream labor. Rutherford B. Hayes signed the legislation into law.

One would think this newly-passed labor regulation would spell the end of The Grand Eastern & Western Coffee Company, but no. Gilman Halifax merely changed tactics. The law

said he couldn't force Americans to perform labour in their dreams. But if he could get workers to agree to work under his terms - to strike a deal with him - then all was fair.

Much like when he first built his empire, Halifax traveled the country. He sought out the poorest and most desperate communities. He struck deals with them, and his coffee and wares were once again produced. His stores restocked.

But Americans by and large rejected Halifax. E&Ws continued to be vandalized - their products stolen or destroyed. Meanwhile, newspapers Halifax didn't own once again characterized him in monstrous terms. The New York Times in 1892 referred to him as a "A specter haunting the country. The boogeyman of small towns across America - The Traveling Salesman."

The Grand Eastern & Western Coffee Company couldn't continue with Halifax in charge. Decades before, it'd become publicly traded. Shareholders demanded Halifax leave his own company. He fought the calls for his registration at first, but before the beginning of the twenty century, Halifax conceded defeat.

Without Halifax, E&Ws once again became profitable. They continued many of their unethical business practices that began under their founder - disenfranchising labor, buying out the press to prevent criticism. But in the 1930s, they were sued by the federal government under newly passed antitrust legislation. They were forced to divide their storefronts, manufacturing, and media companies into separate businesses.

In the 1970s, E&Ws were closing nationwide - Unable to keep up with the changing times and competition. By 2008 there was only one store left - their once flagship location in Davenport. That is - until the flood. The Mississippi River washed over downtown Davenport. This event caused massive damage to many buildings. But in the case of the first and last E&W - the flood waters seemingly swept the building away. Causing it to disappear from the earth - as mysteriously as it had once appeared.

But what happened to Gilman Halifax, The *Original* Traveling Salesman? No one knows. At the turn of the 20th century he disappeared from the public. Newspapers at the time speculated about his absence - but no investigative reporter ever found a conclusive answer to where he went. A popular phrase from this era was - "Where is Halifax?" - meaning to invoke a question without a definite answer.

Halifax's disappearance is so complete that he makes little or no appearance in our history textbooks. I've searched through a dozen high school American history books. Halifax isn't mentioned - even in passing - in eight of them. In three he's noted as "a successful 19th century businessman..." without any further qualification. Only one textbook mentions his labor practices and the subsequent strikes and laws passed - though these are hastily summarized in two paragraphs. Beyond high school history books, there's no academic or journalistic documents that explain where he came from or where he went to at the dawn of the 20th century. We might as well still use the phrase, "Where is Halifax?" today.

And we shouldn't be surprised then that a new figure has emerged wearing the mantle of The Traveling Salesman - someone darker and more dangerous than the original. We've been left without the weapons necessary to stand against him. Hopefully it's not too late to learn the lessons we need to once again defeat this dark being. But I believe I've gone on long enough on this subject for tonight. Back to our main show.