

[[INTRO]]

You're in your garden on a fine, sunny day.
A thorny weed has overtaken much of the soil.
You go to rip it from the earth, but prick your finger.
After which, you hear all the flowers whispering...
Murmuring and conspiring: against you.

You need my help.

[[AVFD intro fades in]]

This is A Voice From Darkness.

[[AVFD intro fades out]]

Hello all, this is Dr. Malcolm Ryder, parapsychologist. Here tonight to delve into the strange, surreal, and mysterious history of our country. And let's stop right there for a moment. You might have noticed my greeting is different this evening—where I normally promise to help you with your supernatural, paranormal, and otherworldly problems. I'm sorry to say we won't be doing that tonight, and with some episodes going forward. We'll instead be dividing episodes into those with call-in segments, where I help you over the phone as I normally would. And some nights, like tonight, we'll devote completely to Today In Odd America. The purpose for the divide is to give these two mainstays of our show more breathing room. To allow us to share longer stories from history, and to give callers more time to go into details about their problems, or give us more time to possibly take multiple calls. I hope you're understanding of this change.

But let's move on to National Alerts, which we have only one of this evening. After which, we'll go right into Today In Odd America, where we'll look at an encounter a librarian in Rhode Island had in the 1890s with a familiar figure. But first, here's National Alerts:

[[National Alerts music fades in.]]

Our only National Alert tonight is for Glacier National Park in Montana. A Boy Scout troop staying the night near Hidden Lake reported something odd the other night. Over their radio they heard a ship calling out for help. They were confused as there were no boats at the lake. The sky then turned black. Lightning struck. A cruise ship appeared from nowhere and drifted through the sky as if traveling across the water. The Scout Master tried to answer the ship's radioman, but all he heard from the other end was panicked cries. The cruise ship scraped the side of Clements Mountain causing the hull to rip in half. Bodies were flung from the ship into the sky, though they did not fall to the earth. Instead they floated in the air as if in water. The Scouts made attempts to call emergency responders on scene, but by the time they arrived the remains of the ship had disappeared. All that was left were bloated bodies - corpses I'm afraid to say - that drifted slowly downward through the air. As if falling to the bottom of the ocean. The

mystery ship that crashed into Clements Mountain and disappeared has not been identified. It's advised to stay away from Glacier National Park for the time being.

This is our only National Alert for the night.

[[NA music fades out]]

And now it's time for Today In Odd America where tonight we'll hear the story of a small town librarian and her stand against a creature most folks across the country feared. Listen to that story now...

[[Today In Odd America music fades in]]

Today in Odd America we find ourselves in Bainbridge, Rhode Island. The year, 1896. The town of Bainbridge had opened the doors of a new library several months prior. The public institution was popular and frequented by many. Including those from out of town.

On this day in 1896 the town librarian, a woman named Susan Witmore, was surprised to find a man known nationwide walk up to her desk. Without meaning to, she burst out: "The Traveling Salesman."

Standing before her was Gilman Halifax, the first man to earn that title. And he smiled wolfishly. All too happy that his reputation spread like a disease before him.

"Well you can call me Gilman, or Mr. Halifax, if you'd prefer Miss Witmore," he said.

"And why are you here, Mr. Halifax?" She asked. Instead of answering, The Traveling Salesman glanced up at the ceiling, he took a few steps about the room.

"It's not a large space you occupy," he said. "Surely not many books can fit in this cozy little library of yours."

"It's adequate for a town our size," Susan Witmore assured him. The Traveling Salesman approached the librarian's desk.

"Miss Witmore," he said. "A little over a year ago I heard your town was interested in building a library. I very generously offered to use my personal wealth to fund this endeavor. To build a palace of knowledge, if you will. Yet, I found out you were the dissenting voice. And so I'm here to see what you created on your own, and I do not mean to be rude, but I find this place inadequate."

The Librarian rose to her seat.

“Mr. Halifax,” she said. “The terms you wished to make with our community were, and you’ll forgive me—atrocious. You only offered to pay for the construction of an enormous building our small town could never afford to maintain. Additionally, those very maintenance costs you were demanding we abide by would have left almost no money to purchase books or fund library services, which are the whole point of this public good, would you not agree?”

Again, The Traveling Salesman did not answer her question directly. Instead he stepped back and poked his head down one of the narrow rows of shelves.

“A shame,” he said. “Truly a shame. I found this architect, man by the name of Hayek. You wouldn’t believe what he can do with space. There’s a few communities across this great country that have accepted my offer. They have Hayek-designed libraries courtesy of yours truly. I’m told these structures are so popular that many folks find it difficult to leave them. A shame I couldn’t give the town of Bainbridge the same.”

“Is that all you came to say, Mr. Halifax?” The Librarian asked.

From the inner pocket of his jacket, Halifax produced a beautiful clothbound edition of *Pride and Prejudice*. He placed the book on the librarian’s desk.

“You wouldn’t let me donate a building to be your library, Miss Witmore, but surely you’ll let me at least provide your town a copy of one of my favorite books?”

She hesitated. Jane Austen was one of her favorite authors as well.

“We already have a copy of *Pride and Prejudice*, Mr. Halifax.”

“No doubt you do, Miss Witmore. An intelligent librarian like yourself, of course you’d make sure you have the classics on hand.” Halifax picked up the book and went to put it back in his pocket but stopped himself. “But what if,” he said. “Now this is just a scenario I’m imagining this moment, what if: your one and only copy was checked out already. Say by a young woman. And the next day a young man comes in, wishing to read the book so he can learn to be as charming as Mr. Bingley, as honorable as Mr. Darcy, and to make sure he never becomes a wicked cad like that Mr. Wickham. It’d be terrible for you to have to turn him away. And then imagine further still, you do take my copy, and this young man has it checked out while a young woman has your other copy. I can see them now: meeting in the street by chance. Each seeing the other is reading the delightful love story contrived by Ms. Austen. How would they not themselves fall in love at first sight? I suppose such an occurrence is unlikely, Miss Witmore. But do you really want to deny the possibility of it ever happening? Are you not a romantic like myself?”

Susan Witmore did not trust Gilman Halifax, there were so many rumors about him and his dreadful company, strange tales of forced dream labor. While studying library science, the head of her program had collected newspapers that spoke of wherever Halifax was in the country at

any given time. He'd concluded: "The time lines don't make any sense. No one can travel that fast across the country. Not by any natural means."

But all that aside, in that moment, Gilman Halifax's reasoning was sound and Susan could not construct an excuse to deny taking his book.

"Mr. Halifax," she said, "The Bainbridge Public Library will happily accept your generous donation."

The Traveling Salesman handed the book to The Librarian. Once again, his smile turned predatory.

"Thank-you, Miss Witmore, for your extraordinary kindness on this day."

And with those words, Halifax disappeared.

* * *

Over a month passed before anyone took home the Halifax edition of *Pride & Prejudice*. But finally when the book was checked out by a Mrs. Rosebaum, she brought the book back the next day. Her husband led her into the library, which he'd never done before, and he had a concerned look on his face while his wife had a blank one.

Susan Witmore asked her: "Did you enjoy the book so much you read it all in a day?"

But Mrs. Rosebaum said nothing. Her eyes did not blink or focus on anything in particular.

"Did you dislike the book?"

Again, Mrs. Rosebaum gave no answer.

"She stayed up all day and night reading it," Mr. Rosebaum said. "She didn't even come to bed. I found her in her reading chair early this morning. I believe she caught a cold sitting up all night like that."

Susan Witmore did not like this one bit.

"Yes I'm sure that's all it is," she said. "You should take your wife home and call the doctor immediately." Mr. Rosebaum agreed and departed with his wife. Guiding her slowly back out the library doors and down the steps.

Susan Witmore hadn't opened the Halifax copy of *Pride and Prejudice* except to put library check-out papers within the book.

She opened the book now to a random page toward the middle—

“HELP ME. HELP ME. HELP I shouldn’t be here. None of this is real. None of it is happening,” Mrs. Rosebaum screamed.

“I do say, Mrs. Rosebaum,” Mr. Bingley said. “I believe you would calm down if you were to join us in a lively country dance. Wouldn’t that be grand?”

“Oh yes, I would love a dance! Please say yes, Mrs. Rosebaum,” Lydia Bennett said and grabbed Mrs. Rosebaum by the arm.

“Get away from me! All of you,” Mrs. Rosebaum shouted. “None of you are real. None of you—”

Susan Witmore slammed the book shut. She felt nauseous. Light-headed. It was as though the book had gripped her. Pulled her inward. But as soon as its pages closed, the feeling went away.

Poor Mrs. Rosebaum, Susan thought. What has The Traveling Salesman done to you? What Have I done by trusting him?

Susan Witmore closed the library early. She thought back to her training in library science, to her mentor who’d taken a strange interest in The Traveling Salesman. He’d believed Gilman Halifax was more than what he appeared. And now Susan regretted not treating him with the caution he so clearly deserved.

But she had a plan.

Two days later, with the library doors locked, The Librarian stood alone in a small room with no windows and only one door. She’d considered sending a telegram to Gilman Halifax, summoning him back to Bainbridge that way, and she imagined he’d come if called in such a mundane manner, but her plan required reaching out to him through other means. In such a way she believed it would catch him off balance.

In the room she had prepared there was an empty garbage bin at the center. The Librarian stood with the Halifax copy of *Pride and Prejudice* over the bin, a candle flickered behind her—casting her shadow before her eyes.

She used the already lit candle to light another. One she held in one hand, with the Halifax book in the other.

She slowly brought the flame to the book over the garbage bin.

But the sound of footsteps in the library interrupted her. So she waited.

Three curt knocks struck the door.

“Enter,” Susan Witmore said.

Gilman Halifax showed himself in.

Only one of his vest buttons was fastened. His tie loose, and his pocket kerchief a mess. He did not seem prepared to meet The Librarian again, at least at this time. She did not ask him where he'd come from, how he'd known what she was about to do. Her only goal in the moment was to rescue poor Mrs. Rosebaum.

“Please shut the door, if you would,” Susan said and Mr. Halifax obliged.

“You shouldn't do what you're about to do with that book,” The Traveling Salesman said. “You'll only do more harm.”

“I have no intention of actually burning the book. I only used this all as a ruse to get you here again, and quickly, Mr. Halifax.”

The Traveling Salesman smiled.

“You're a good woman, Miss Witmore. One of your library patrons is in trouble, and so you rushed to get the one man who could help her. Truly a good soul, you are. And perhaps... perhaps now you'll be more amiable to make a deal with me. I could help return your patron back to her normal state. And you can agree to make some alterations to your library. If you think about it, really you're winning twice over, if you take my deal.”

The Librarian spoke a word then, one I will not repeat now. But the candle in her hand and the one behind her grew brighter. And her shadow, which was on the ground before her, grew darker.

For a moment, Susan swore she saw surprise, if not fear, in The Traveling Salesman's eyes.

“In our brief meeting before,” she said, “you never asked me where I studied library science. Are you familiar with Ravenswood University?”

Gilman Halifax crept back toward the door.

“I am not familiar with that particular school.”

“It's hidden away, on an island. And not a very old university. Perhaps that's why it slipped your notice. But despite the school's youth, I assure you, William Milner, the head librarian, is quite skilled. Much of my time spent under his tutelage was learning how to catalog various mysteries,

secrets, and things stranger still. You wouldn't believe what one might absorb by reading obscure and ancient tomes in order to figure out how to catalog them properly."

The Traveling Salesman heard everything she said but his eyes darted back and forth from one corner of the room to another.

"I can't help but see you have a mirror in each corner of the room," he said.

"Thank-you for noticing. Isn't it odd how each makes my shadow appear substantive? As if four dark doppelgangers of myself were in the room with us?"

Halifax furiously turned the door knob, but the door was locked.

"There are words I could speak now. Words I've never spoken, so I don't know what consequence would befall me. But I know whatever would happen to me, would happen to you seven times over first, Mr. Halifax."

The Traveling Salesman turned back to The Librarian.

"What deal are you proposing, Miss Witmore? One that would guarantee my safety out of this room?"

"Return Mrs. Rosebaum to how she was before she read your copy of Ms. Austen's book. And swear you'll never step foot in my town ever again. You will not conspire to impact this place indirectly either. Through proxies or any other means you have at your disposal. Agree to all of that, and I will let you leave this room alive."

The Traveling Salesman's eyes once again moved across the space. The shadows that reflected in the mirrors looked less and less like Susan Witmore and more like dark primordial creatures. Ones that hungerd for something they had not devoured in time immemorial.

"Miss Witmore, your terms are acceptable," he said.

A day later Mrs. Rosebaum recovered. The town doctor insisted she had a bad fever and all her memories of the past days dining with the Bennetts, and having dances with the Bingleys were a fever dream brought about by sickness.

Gilman Halifax never returned to Bainbridge, Rhode Island. But it was also in these days when his business was vastly rejected by Americans. When his stores were vandalized from coast to coast.

He was rarely seen in public by the turn of the century. When he was, it was often in Saint Louis, consulting with The Veiled Prince. But he was also said to frequent Mackinac Island, though he was never allowed on the grounds of Ravenswood University despite his protests.

When the Ravenswood Library burnt down, and William Milner was killed in the fire, there were some at the school who speculated that Halifax was somehow involved. This suspicion was never proved or disproved.

A new library was constructed, and Susan Witmore was invited by Ravenswood to be the head librarian. At this point, The Traveling Salesman had nearly disappeared completely. But this didn't stop Susan Witmore from taking precautions. Across the island, she left certain objects, drew obscure symbols, and whispered arcane words. All with the intention of preventing Gilman Halifax, or any soul like him, from ever stepping foot on Mackinac Island again. Her spell was so strong, it's magic has lasted generations.

[TIOA music fades out].

Susan Witmore has cast a long shadow over Ravenswood. Her influence is still present today, not only in how the library is arranged, and the supernatural cataloged, but even how subjects are divided into different majors in the undergraduate programs. Sadly one thing she was not able to accomplish was to convince Ravenswood Administration to let her teach the dark discipline of shadow magic. Though the school will gladly explore all other elements of the dark metaphysics: mirror, memory, dream, flesh, and spirit, Ravenswood since its inception has not allowed for the darkest of the dark metaphysics to be taught on campus.

However it is rumored she did, in secret, impart some wisdom in this area to a few students and professors. Possibly even to a relative of my own, but of course these are all just rumors. I will say, it is a shame the university administration did not listen to her on this matter. Perhaps during the years The Joyful Executioner—which I'll remind you was the murderous shadow of a friend turned enemy of my own that stalked Ravenswood—when that shadow creature terrorized students, there would have been more survivors had the administration listened to Susan Witmore and trained students to defend themselves against the shadows.

And if the Administration had listened to Susan Witmore's advice, I would have had more information before me when Amanda called into this show sharing her problem of being haunted by a black door. A black door it took me too long to find out was her shadow. Had I known then what I know now, I believe I could have helped her. But now... now that she's traveled to places beyond on her own... She is outside my reach.

[A beat]

I'll end things here tonight. I'm Dr. Malcolm Ryder, parapsychologist. And remember, if you're experiencing anything supernatural, paranormal, or otherworldly, feel free to call-in next time on A Voice From Darkness.

[[AVFD outro music]]