

[[Intro]]

You're walking on the beach, early in the morning.
A voice calls out for help from the water.
You jump into the waves, and swim toward the calls.
But the voice turns to mocking laughter, and webbed-hands pull you under.

You need my help.

[[AVFD music kicks in]]

This is A Voice From Darkness.

[[AVFD music fades out]]

Good evening all, this is Dr. Malcolm Ryder, parapsychologist. Here to help you with your supernatural, paranormal, and otherworldly problems. Only back in Chicago as of an hour ago. I had a house call in New York City. Or penthouse call rather, though not for a client but the police. It seems a type designer, someone who designs custom fonts, their penthouse caught fire. Almost burned their whole building down. Presumably the type designer was home at the time. Though the only skeleton found in the charred remains was something no one would ever call human. The police said our number here at the station was the last the deceased had dialed, some months back. I'm afraid I wasn't of much help. I'm not sure I offered any light in the case, so much as cast a greater darkness.

[A beat]

Despite that dour note, we do have a lovely show planned this evening, as always. There's a few national alerts, all for the Midwest tonight, but after that we'll open the phone lines. So let's get through our national alerts, so we can take your calls.

[[National Alerts fades in]]

Our first national alert is for my own city of Chicago. Earlier today, a blue line el train heading from O'Hare downtown disappeared for seven minutes - between the Addison and Belmont stops. When it reappeared, none of the passengers recalled the disappearance. However, security camera footage was reviewed. There were 28 passengers on the train when it disappeared. But when it reappeared, there were 35. There are seven strangers in our city right now. We're not sure why they're here, but be advised, they are present. Proceed through the city with caution.

Our second national alert is for Duluth, Minnesota. If you live in or near Duluth, do not forget to turn off all your lights from 9:04pm to 11:13pm tonight. The past three years in a row, every lightbulb in Duluth - in homes, offices, flashlights, car headlights - have exploded on this day during that time frame. The city would prefer the event not repeat again this year.

And our third national alert is for my alma mater, Ravenswood University. I received a call earlier today from a Dr. Ian Forsyth, who I have no previous relationship with, but thought many Ravenswood students might listen to my show and heed my advice. Dr. Forsyth's research primarily deals with the dark metaphysical property of mirrors, and so he recently installed a mirror maze in the abandoned building north of the western quad. He kindly asks that if you're not one of his students that you not enter the maze. "It is not a carnival amusement," he said. "But a powerful tool meant to help those in need of gazing inward, and confronting themselves." Four students who entered the maze, uninvited, are now in the university's intensive care unit. So if you're a student at Ravenswood, do not enter the Mirror Maze north of the western quad without the expressly-stated permission of Dr. Forsyth.

[[National Alerts music fades out]]

That's all for national alerts tonight.

ACT II

RYDER

All right we're opening up the lines now... and that did not take long. We already have a caller. Hello, you're on the air with Dr. Malcolm Ryder, parapsychologist. Why don't you tell us your name and what supernatural problem you've called in about tonight.

AARON

Hi, Dr. Ryder, this is Aaron. I've been thinking about calling you for awhile about something. I've thought about it a little, maybe not as much as I should have, but I just need to talk to someone.

RYDER

And what is it you're calling about, Aaron?

AARON

Something that happened to me and a few friends in high school, or I guess, right after high school. The summer after we graduated. I saw something. We all did, and well... more than that happened. It's complicated.

RYDER

How about we start at the beginning then? Walk us all through what happened.

AARON

Like I said, the summer after my senior year of high school, me and three friends: James, Michael, and Tyler...we decided to go on a camping trip. Kind of a last ha-rah before we all went our separate ways in life. There was this forest near a lake... James had been there a lot. He loved to camp, even just by himself. He suggested the trip. We got there late in the day.

(MORE)

AARON (CONT'D)

Tyler had stolen a six-pack from his old man, I brought half a bottle of whiskey, figured we were gonna set up our tents and drink and talk about old times. The future. But James, he had other plans. He told us then, as we unpacked, he'd brought us there for a special reason. Said we'd have to see it to believe it.

RYDER

What did he take you there for?

AARON

There was this small lake. James had hidden a canoe in the bushes near its shore. He said there was something out on the water. Something we wouldn't believe. That would change our lives. So we got in the canoe and traveled out.

A beat.

AARON (CONT'D)

What I'm about to say I saw. I'm not sure you'll believe me.

RYDER

Aaron, I assure you I'll treat your story with the credulity it deserves. Please go on.

AARON

We paddled a ways out, and there was this circular part of the water in the middle of the lake. About two feet in diameter. It looked different from the rest of the water. The rest of the lake looked real. But that two feet. It was like... like: "the idea of water" if that makes any sense. Not like how water looks when you stare at it. More like how... how you picture it in your mind. Does that make any sense?

RYDER

It does, actually. I believe I've encountered something like you've described before.

AARON

You've seen the idea of water?

RYDER

I saw something. Something otherworldly, something... noumenon. At least that's the academic term we tend to apply to things-in-of-themselves. That which exists, but beyond perception. At least by our normal senses.

AARON

James told us to put our hands into the water. The different water. He called it "the well-spring." I never felt anything like it before. People like to say "...and water is wet" when something is really obvious. So obvious it shouldn't even need to be stated. But I never felt "wetness" before putting my hand in the well-spring. And I never have since.

RYDER

You encountered an idea in the material world. The experience can often be life-changing. In a variety of ways.

AARON

James got serious then. He told us: "Drink. And Drink deeply."

A beat.

AARON (CONT'D)

No one did at first. We just looked at him. Like he was crazy. And we were right to. There was something in his eyes. An intensity. But he wasn't normally that sort of person. At least he hadn't been. But I started noticing things, way before that camping trip. All of us did. It was impossible not to. Our whole senior year, it was like he was a different person. Anyway, when he told us to drink from the well-spring, Michael pushed back: "What the hell are you talking about? It looks weird.

(MORE)

AARON (CONT'D)

It's probably salt water mixing with fresh water or something." James shook his head. "No," he said. "It's so much more than that." He said he'd taken a camping trip to the same spot the previous summer by himself. Found the well-spring then. And he drank from it. "Everything changed for me then," he said.

RYDER

Did he say how?

AARON

A bit, but he didn't really need to. We knew him. Senior year, he was different, like I said. Before, he used to show up to school a little late, got in some trouble here and there. Like the rest of us—he was a middle of the road student. Mostly Cs and Bs. But senior year, James was the all-star. At school bright and early, suddenly he joined a bunch of clubs, straight As across the board. The guy had never acted in his life. Never could carry a tune either. But he starred in the fall drama and the spring musical.

RYDER

I've heard of such cases before. How did you and the others respond? Did you all drink from the well-spring?

A beat.

AARON

They did. Michael and Tyler. I didn't though. James kept talking. Telling us how great it'd be for us. "It won't hit you too hard at first," he said. "Don't worry. But it'll grow in you." I didn't like the sound of that. "Grow inside of you?" What would grow? Like a parasite or something? What if there were microscopic worms or something in the water. Bacteria. Anything like that.

(MORE)

AARON (CONT'D)

Maybe that's why the water looked the way it did. And maybe they got inside James' brain. And he was just in the first stages of something. He felt great now, but what if the next stage he turned into a vegetable? Like I said, the other guys drank. They kept trying to get me to. But I refused. They kept pushing. They wouldn't row back to shore at first. Michael and Tyler, they suddenly had that same intensity in their eyes that James had. I didn't like that. It scared me. But I- I got out my pocket knife. Said I'd stab them if they tried to make me drink. Tyler said they should take some water back in a canteen or something. In case I changed my mind. Or they could give it to others. Maybe sell it. James shook his head. "Tried," he said. "Just turns into plain old water. Loses whatever makes it... special. You gotta drink it here. It's the only way."

A beat.

RYDER

You said your two other friends became more "intense" immediately after. Were there other changes that happened to them on your trip?

AARON

A little, maybe. But I thought that it was just the placebo effect. They'd just been told they drank magic water, after all. So Tyler and Michael started acting like they had more energy. Like everything was great and made them happy.

RYDER

But you remained skeptical?

AARON

I didn't drink the water, if that's what you're getting at.

RYDER

That's not unreasonable. Honestly, hesitancy when faced with anything out of the ordinary - otherworldly or otherwise - is probably the safest path to walk. So is your call more just out of curiosity about what your friends likely really drank years ago?

AARON

No. I mean, maybe some. But no. You see, all three of my friends after that trip, all of us, we had different plans for life. Tyler joined the Air Force. Michael went to community college. And James moved down to LA to try and make it as an actor. That hadn't been his plan a year prior, but, like I said, he changed. Less than ten years later, today: Tyler's an astronaut. He was enlisted for three years before they made him an officer. And barely an officer two years before they sent him over to NASA. Michael started a side business while getting his associates. It turned into a multi-million dollar operation. And James. If I told you his stage name, you wouldn't believe me. He's won so many awards. Oscars. Emmys. Tonys. You name it. All three of my friends, after that trip, after drinking that water, they changed. And they've had incredible success. Incredible lives.

A beat.

AARON (CONT'D)

And meanwhile, meanwhile things haven't been so great for me. I mean, I do all right. Most the time. But not great. Not like them.

RYDER

Why'd you call, Aaron? What is it you're really wanting to know? Did you want to find out if it's too late for you to drink from the well-spring? To maybe capture some of what your friends were able to?

Aaron gives a bitter laugh.

AARON

It is too late. I mean, at least with that well-spring. All that land. That forest. They bulldozed it the year after we camped there. Drained the lake. Cemented it over. Suburbia had to sprawl somewhere, and I guess it chose there. No, what I called about. What I want to know—my friends. They didn't drink some parasite or anything that took them over. Right? I was wrong way back then.

RYDER

That's probably not the case. I can't be certain, but based on what you've said, I'd say it's another matter all together. Sometimes the Noumenon as I mentioned before, the Platonic, The Ideal World... bleeds into our... material, temporal, corruptible reality. When it does, without fail, it'll produce strange effects. And coming into contact with Noumena changes people. It has the power to make us into Gods or monsters or anything in between.

AARON

That's what I thought you'd say. I mean, maybe not that exactly, but you know...

RYDER

I'm sure that's disappointing to find out, but I hope I've been able to give you some closure at the very least.

AARON

It's not that I'm just disappointed, I can't stop thinking about the well-spring. That day. The opportunity I had. That I didn't take. And everything they've gotten - my friends - that I haven't. I can't stop thinking about how things might be different had I taken a drink too.

RYDER

I sympathize with you Aaron, I do. That's one of those difficult problems in life— learning to live with ourselves after we've done something we regret. Or regretting what we didn't do.

AARON

But you can help me, right? You know where another well-spring is. You have to know. You've probably drunk from one too. You know where all this stuff is. And you're successful.

RYDER

Aaron, I assure you I haven't.

AARON

I've been saving up money. I knew I was going to call you at some point about this. Five thousand dollars. Up front. I have it. I can give it to you today. If you tell me where another well-spring is. And then, after I drink, after I change. When I'm successful, I can pay you more. The sky's the limit. Probably millions.

RYDER

Again, I'm sorry, but I can't help you. These places are exceedingly rare. And even if I knew where one was, I wouldn't be able to tell you, at least not for money. Just like if your friends had taken some of the water in a canteen years ago to sell, it wouldn't have worked. Noumena are easily corrupted, destroyed.

AARON

I understand. I was hoping you could help me—

RYDER

(interrupts)

I am helping you. There's a difference between giving you what you want and helping you. And I'm doing the latter.

A beat.

RYDER (CONT'D)

That's all I can tell you, Aaron. I hope you learn to enjoy the life you have for all that it is. You're living the same life now you would have had your friends not found the well-spring. Their lives would be different, but not yours. All you have to do is accept that truth and be content with what you have.

AARON

I know you're right. I do. But that doesn't make things easy.

RYDER

No, I imagine it doesn't. But I hope it's enough.

A beat.

RYDER (CONT'D)

I think we'll end things here, unless you have anything more you need from me, Aaron?

AARON

No, I'm good. I think I am. I have closure, like you said, at least. Thanks, Doctor.

RYDER

Thank-you for calling, Aaron. I wish you all the best and hope you have a happy life, all things considered.

A beat.

RYDER (CONT'D)

That's all the time we have for tonight. Once again, I'm Dr. Malcolm Ryder, parapsychologist. And remember, if you're experiencing anything supernatural, paranormal, or otherworldly, please feel free to call in, next time on A Voice From Darkness.

AVFD outro Music fades in and out.