

Season 1: Episode 6

“A Call with Haden Blackman”

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how it ends



NETWORK INTRO
Rusty Quill Presents...

[INTRO MUSIC FADE IN]

MICAH [Season 1 Intro]

For as long as I can remember, I've suffered from unnerving, recurring dreams and night terrors. The How it Ends podcast is an exploration of daily life, and the imprint it leaves on our memory and consciousness. This podcast is made by me, Micah Jones with some help from my two closest friends, Elia Cabral and Devon Williams, I'm not sure where this journey will take me. So follow along as I try to uncover the meaning of my dreams, and finally get some sleep. I'm releasing this in real-time. So if you're just joining, please start from the beginning. And thank you for listening.

[INTRO MUSIC FADE OUT]

[SCENE TRANSITION]

MICAH

Hey, everyone. So, some of you might remember a while back I had a... I had a bit of a freak out at Elia's after we went to Salem. We were hanging out that day, and she showed me a book that she bought the day that we were there. It was called The Field Guide to North American Monsters. And you might remember that that freaked me out a little bit because I found some connection to what I've been dreaming and it related to an entry in that book. So on a whim, I decided to reach out to the author of that book and see if maybe he could tell me a little bit more about the stories that were in it and his inspiration. And lucky for me, he responded. So, that's pretty cool. We've been emailing back and forth a little bit. And I asked him if he would come on the podcast. He is. So please let me introduce you to W. Haden Blackman, author of The Field Guide to North American Monsters. Haden?

W. HADEN BLACKMAN

Hey.

MICAH

Hey.

W. HADEN BLACKMAN

Thanks for having me on. I apologize in advance..well, I guess it's not in advance anymore but I apologize that anything in the book would leave you traumatized. But I'm happy to talk about it.

MICAH

Yeah. Uh... I guess I might have been...I think I even said this, that I was a little bit extra that day when I...when I reacted. I think it just...it really...it... it struck a chord with me. But um...since then, I've... I've been... looking into anything and everything that can kind of relate to my dream or... you know, stories about being spooked in the woods, or seeing things that may or may not be there. Really, I... I don't know how to get around it. I... I just... I really couldn't... I couldn't not ask you about the Grinning Man. So you didn't really traumatize me so much as my dreams do, but yeah.

W. HADEN BLACKMAN

Right. Uh-huh. (affirmative)

MICAH

Yeah, so um... sorry, go ahead.

W. HADEN BLACKMAN

Oh yeah. So what... I mean... I'm happy to answer anything I can and uh... it's been a while since I wrote the book, but I still have pretty vivid memories of doing the research and some of the conversations I had with folks about some of these...kind of monsters and legends and stories that are in there. So I'm happy to answer any questions you have.

MICAH

Yeah. I guess...um... Just to preface before... You know, before we talk about the Grinning Man itself, I want to know what really

inspired you to write this book and what got you into the paranormal.

W. HADEN BLACKMAN

Yeah, so... I think... For me it maybe is not unlike some of what you're doing now, except maybe at an earlier age I had things that really, really scared me as a kid. Um... I was a pretty cowardly little kid. Um... I had some older brothers that leaned into that pretty hard, I think.

And...um...But in order to kind of fight back, I did... I decided to kind of own it, and do a lot of research, and kind of immerse myself into it. Even as a like... you know, 9, 10-year-old. So I immersed myself into horror movies and comics and Dungeons & Dragons and... you know anything I could do that would make all that stuff seem a little less scary, and not really knowing why. But through that, I kind of started to discover these stories that bordered on the real, right?

MICAH

Right.

W. HADEN BLACKMAN

And that really fascinated me, so... You know, it's one thing to be afraid of a werewolf or a... you know, whatever. But when you start hearing stories about kind of... Bigfoot and The Jersey Devil and Mothman and these other monsters that people felt so sure that they had seen and encountered? That, as a... as a 10 and 11-year-old really, really kind of captured my imagination and um... And again, it was almost as a defense mechanism to not be scared was to kind of dive deeper and deeper into it. And of course, [chuckles] I don't know if it actually worked, but I think it maybe made me more... more afraid of this stuff over time? But I couldn't get away from it. It was like... you know, it's that kind of fascination with a car wreck almost, that you have to kind of keep digging deeper and deeper and deeper.

MICAH

Yeah. Uh...I agree. I think I've been experiencing a little bit of that, myself. You know, um... I've been experiencing these dreams, particularly this one that has haunted me for a long time. And

for the most part, I stay away from horror so I kind of did the exact opposite of what you did just because I... I... I naturally just distanced myself from it. But ever since I started this podcast and things seem to just keep falling in my lap and I almost can't... I can't ignore it now. And uh... I'm also driven to just want some answers. Even if it turns out to be nothing, I just would like some answers and to find out that maybe I'm not... It's not just me.

So. Diving right in. Uh...when I read through some of the stuff about the Grinning Man, admittedly, the UFO connection didn't... didn't really jive with me. But the idea of this... this thing that haunts paths and trails, particularly in New Jersey because, as I've said in our emails, that's where I'm from. And it was a very specific mention in the entry. You know, the idea of this haunting figure scaring people and doing nothing but just staring and watching them really, really unsettles me. So I guess if you can point to any more information about the Grinning Man or what you...what research you did in looking for that particular monster would be a great place to start.

W. HADEN BLACKMAN

Sure. So, um... I had not heard about the Grinning Man until I started doing research for this book in particular, even though I had read a ton, you know...kind of previously. Um... but there were other monsters that were similar. I mean, it obviously has some kind of tie-backs or call-backs to other, more traditional Boogeymen. Um... there's even, you know, in old folklore there's characters that do very little more than just stand and stare and kind of lurk around and... and you know, sometimes they're portents of death, or are... you know, kind of bad omens? But don't really engage other than just appearing. So... so it wasn't strange to find it.

Um... what was kind of unsettling for me, too, were... Once you started reading all the first-hand accounts from the '60s of people that, you know, claim to have seen this figure... And it wasn't just in New Jersey. It started there and then kind of spread out and then kind of came back over time. But was the consistency of the reports and the kind of three or four traits that came up again and again and again.

So his size, right? And it's not just that he was tall, but also wide and well over 200 pounds, and just almost abnormally large in every way. The fact that he had this kind of green shimmering suit which, again, given the time period in the '60s and all the UFO sightings and things like that, that might have just been part of the... you know... kind of shared psychosis, or the... it was in kind of the cultural subconscious at that point. But then it was that smile, right? And that... You don't get that detail with a lot of these other types of characters.

Mothman. That's one of the big things with Mothman, was his eyes, and his glowing eyes. Although he never really interacted with anybody and was just kind of always hovering or lurking around, it was the eyes. Eyes are a big deal. And sometimes it's the smell, or it's a sound. But that smile kept coming up again and again, with the Grinning Man in particular. And that, I felt, was pretty unusual.

So I started to dig into a little bit more, and then... Again, I did a few interviews and read a lot of the first-hand accounts and um... some people had backed away from kind of... what they had seen and weren't really sure anymore. They were young when they had... you know, made the claims and now they were kind of backing away. But as... as you kind of dig into it...just that consistency of the smile and the sense of dread that that caused, and the motionlessness of him, just really kind of stuck with me. So that's why he kind of warranted an inclusion in the book.

It is a weird thing, though, because it is tied also to that... that kind of boom of UFO sightings in the '60s. And there was kind of this craze across the country with... with you know, UFOs and then the lingering aftereffects. People would see other entities in the area after they had these UFO sightings.

Again, it's just... It's hard to know whether or not this is some kind of cultural subconscious thing going on, if it's a mass psychosis. If it's... you know, people hear one story from one area and then they embellish it and you know, kind of carry it into another area and kind of make it their own. But it was interesting to me that even as the character... or the figure

moved from kind of state to state and town to town, it had these consistent traits again and again and again.

MICAH

Yeah. And I think that that's really how I'm feeling a little bit right now. Because I mean... Admittedly, I've just been sort of plagued with this dream where I'm walking in the woods, and I kind of know where I am, and I'm headed in a direction that I feel... It feels familiar to me and I don't necessarily feel unsafe in this part of the dream. And then at some point after walking, I am... I get this feeling that I'm being watched and every time I turn around in the dream, I immediately wake up. And I think I've said this a couple times on the show, that I... I just... I wake up screaming in a cold sweat. And for years I just wrote this off as this horrible night terror that plagued my little kid brain, but when it carried into adulthood it became more of a nuisance, more than anything. And that's really what I thought it was.

But when I... When I went to my... my dad's shed and I looked through his stuff I came across this little message in this book that said, "Don't let Micah see." And then my mom tells me that what he was saying the night that he died. And that was weird enough, but I think this sort of... The real...um... clincher here was when I reconnected with, um... a guy named Luke that I met when I was really young and he sort of filled in the gaps of a day... the day that I met him, of a memory that I can't... I can't remember this day.

And when he explained to me that I came running out of the woods to his house that I was... I was all scratched up and completely beside myself. I said, "It saw me." And he said that my friend Aimee, who was with him that day, didn't believe me. She thought I was making things up. Um... he didn't know what I meant. And I clearly didn't know what I meant because I didn't even remember it.

But he said he believed me because he had an encounter with something... someone... I don't know... in the woods. And it whispered, "I see you" to him. So... now, you know, I don't really know what to make of any of that. Or if there is anything to

make of it. But I guess, my curiosity is just... getting the better of me and I kind of have to know. I have to keep looking. So one of the things that I wanted to ask is if you, in your search, if you'd heard anything like that. Like you know, The Grinning... the Grinning Man, the description really... it made me... It brought back the feeling, I think, that dream brings on, but this is a whole different thing, you know? It's... I... It's something... Something spoke to me, supposedly. And something spoke to Luke. Do you have any memory of finding anything like that?

W. HADEN BLACKMAN

Yeah, so the... Kind of separating the two things. There's... there's definitely a phenomenon of people feeling watched, in the woods in particular. And this is something that I think, you know... Again, it maybe is even hard-wired into us, evolutionarily, right? To be on our guard?

MICAH

Right.

W. HADEN BLACKMAN

And when you're alone in the forest... I mean, I've felt this. And in fact, you know, it's one of the things that I think drove me to want to some of this research, even as a kid is, you know, being out on... I went to a camp as a kid, and we were out hiking and I got separated, and I was off on my own for a little bit. And--

MICAH

Oh, God.

W. HADEN BLACKMAN

Just that sense of dread, of feeling like you're being watched. And for me, I actually thought I was heading the right direction and stumbled into this um... kind of dilapidated... it wasn't even a shack, it was like a house, in the middle of nowhere. And kind of went in this little barn area and found all these rats had been kind of strung up through their eyes on ropes. Little twine ropes. And it was so... it... and that... the sense of being watched--

MICAH

I just got chills. Oh, my Gosh.

W. HADEN BLACKMAN

Yeah, right? Well, so that was one of those like kind of imprint moments, right? It's a memory that really... when you talk about being watched, that's what I remember. I remember this feeling of being watched that drove me to that area and then when I saw this, and they'd clearly been dead for a long... you know, they were dry and desiccated and everything. So they'd been there a long time, right? And I... Who knows who had done that? If it was crazy... you know... kids that... you know, that were doing it. Or somebody... some vagrant in the woods, or what. I have no idea, right?

But I obviously ran. And running, you just feel that sense of I'm being, not just watched but I'm being chased, right? And I... And again, I feel like that is a common feeling even if you don't run into something like a, you know, a dilapidated barn with rats strung up in it, but the... And I think that ties into a lot of these things that we see recur in kind of folklore and these urban legend sightings.

Even Bigfoot, right? I mean, people feel like they're being watched by Bigfoot. Or, there's, you know, in lumberjack folklore there's a character called The Hide-Behind. Which, obviously, is meant to be more of a joke but it's-it's always right behind you. And if you can just turn fast enough to get a glimpse of him, he'll kill you, right? And that is... is, I think, another one of those things that plays on that sense of you're always being watched. And in a lot of Native American mythology there's, you know, spirits or little people. Kind of, uh... the size of fairies that live in streams or live in the forest that are always watching, right?

So that's one part of it. And then there's a subset of that that kind of ties into the... the voices. And I think that, to me, is almost... It's not as common, but it... it is almost more powerful and, for me, creepier when I hear those stories. And did hear quite a few of those when I was doing my research for this book.

Where people would go-- and it's most often in the woods, or around caves, outskirts of rural areas, things like that. But people would be out there, and they'd have this sense of being watched, and it almost always started with that. And then it would segue into, "And then I started hearing things." And at first, everybody's reluctant to say what they heard. They heard... Maybe it was just, you know, somebody's voice carrying on the wind. It was kids playing somewhere nearby. Or it's, you know, the leaves going through the trees. But invariably, eventually, they get to the point where they admit, "But then I heard words," right?

And the thing that always got to me was the repetition of certain phrases. Things like, "Go back." "Stay away." You know, those types... You know, like warnings, almost. And that to me, again, gave me chills the third or fourth or fifth time that I... that I heard those stories. And it was hard because I wanted to try and find a way to include them in the book, but they... They don't... They don't attach, or pair well with any of the monster stories, right? Like, there's not...

MICAH
Right.

W. HADEN BLACKMAN

... any kind of specific things. And they happen everywhere. And that, I think, is the other thing that...

It's interesting when you look at the folklore, and the way that the... the kind of the monster folklore, and the... the... even ghost sightings kind of play out across the country. Where, on you know... They're everywhere, first of all. So you do have monster stories everywhere.

But you have things like on the East Coast, it's a little bit more... kind of ghost sightings and urban legends and things that clearly the settlers brought over and things like that, right? Whereas you get into the Midwest and toward the West Coast, it's a lot of the lumberjack folklore, some of which has become more scary than it was intended to over time. It's a lot of the Native American mythology being kind of co-opted and kind of...

you know, expanded upon. So there are differences. There's kind of regional differences.

But this story. This story of, "I was being watched and then I heard someone talking to me and I could not pinpoint where the voice was coming from. And it said these things." And those specific phrases repeating over and over again? The consistency of that across the country? That, I think, to me is really chilling and is something that I was never able to answer.

Even when I... You know I did a sequel to this book on hauntings, and I tried to dig into a little bit there, too. Because maybe it was more on that side. Maybe it's more on the kind of... the ghost sighting side. And... and... There's just no... You know, kind of one storyline or mythology or folklore or sighting that helps explain that. Whereas, you know, with Bigfoot, there is, right? And I can kind of...

MICAH
Right.

W. HADEN BLACKMAN

...take that. And even though Bigfoot... There are Bigfoot-type sightings all over the country, you can ground that in this... this kind of humanoid thing that maybe has survived and has been in hiding.

But this thing? Who's talking? I don't know. Is it...? Why are they talking in a language I can understand? And why are they saying these words? The same phrases, regardless of what part of the country they're in. Um, that to me is, I think, something I've certainly have never been able to kind of figure out, and I don't know if anybody has an answer for.

MICAH

Yeah. I really... I didn't even set out to look for any of this, you know? This podcast really started out, um... lighthearted? [chuckles] I think? Uh... you know when me and my friend Elia and my friend Devon you know, sat down and spent some time trying to convince me, I think we thought that it would just be something simple.

And what it seems to be is that I've sort of ripped the Band-Aid off a wound that I didn't know that I had. Um... and I think, you know, now... I mean I'm not sleeping now. And I'm not sleeping as much as I should, and um... I'm definitely struggling, but like to hear... to know that it's not just isolated to one area of the country... or you know, not... that these kind of things really did, like, permeate... stories and folklore is somehow reassuring. Because then maybe I might be able to talk to other people and see if they had some sort of similar background to me.

W. HADEN BLACKMAN

Yeah. I think... And I think that that's a really valuable exercise because I do feel like... It's like ghost sightings, right? Like when I first got into doing all this research, I thought it was going to be fun and *The Field Guide to Monsters* is kind of tongue-in-cheek. And you start to dig into... especially with the ghost stuff. And people, they really believe. And people have had really profound experiences.

The one thing I would say, and I don't know if this... if I'm an optimist or what, but that... It's not all... It's very rarely does it like "it's bad." And so, I don't know how much of these things are warnings, how much of these things that happen, you know, to people are really malevolent versus, you know, an encounter that is just misunderstood. So I think the more you can, you know, talk to people that have had shared experiences...

And look. Everybody has a ghost story. But I found out when I was doing my research almost everybody has a creepy story about being in the woods. Like, it's not... that is not unusual and I think finding where those connections maybe can help understand a little bit more toward... you know, for you, what happened to you--

MICAH

Yeah.

W. HADEN BLACKMAN

And whatever it is that you're... you're trying to sort out.

MICAH

Yeah. And I think that was the other thing, too. Is that, you know, Luke told me... When he told me his story, I didn't immediately place where he was talking about until he told me it was on River Road. Which is actually right across the water... across this brook that runs through Hillsborough from where I was the day that he said I came tearing out of the woods, terrified.

So we were... we were less than a quarter mile apart. And also a month away from me- from... So I don't know, maybe... maybe it was some sort of fantastic phenomenon thing that, you know, two kids just... you know... terrified.

Although I would like to say, for the record and on air, I have actually never been afraid to be in the woods. My dad took me everywhere. And I love hiking. I love being alone. And I've never... I've never been afraid to... to go on long hikes by myself. But um... that... I think that's starting to change.

W. HADEN BLACKMAN

Have you done any research into the area around... around there? That... it's history, or...understanding anything that might have happened around that brook?

MICAH

You know, there's a... there's a lot of... You know, my home town and the Somerville, New Jersey area, and Hillsborough, and... just New Jersey, in general, I'm sure. Weird New Jersey started there. We've got a... a whole host of, um... creep factor stuff. But I've never... I've never heard anything like this. The only thing that I remember from growing up there was the story about the Pig Lady. [chuckles]

W. HADEN BLACKMAN

[chuckles]

MICAH

Uh... yeah. The Pig Lady. It was... It had to do with a murder, and then all this other stuff. But you know, you're supposed to be able to see her walking on a road in Hillsborough and the

surrounding area with an axe. It's just this woman with a pig head. It's, you know... I think it's just... It's kind of right up there with the Chupacabra for me.

W. HADEN BLACKMAN

I mean, that's another common story, right? There's... There's... In Maryland and around Washington, DC and stuff, there's the Goat Man. Which is similar, right?

MICAH

Right.

W. HADEN BLACKMAN

He's half man, half goat. And he actually walks around with an axe, too. And um...

MICAH

Yeah.

W. HADEN BLACKMAN

But I think... you know, and again, I don't know how much of this stuff... You know, I actually believe, right? It's all...

MICAH

Right.

W. HADEN BLACKMAN

And everybody has to kind of come to their own conclusions. But sometimes, you know, there are people who believe really strongly that when something bad happens in an area there is something left over. That there's some kind of... call it "psychic residue," or whatever you want to call it. And it's stays there. And that's, you know... Whether that's a battlefield, or you know, a place where a murder happened, or somebody disappeared or whatever. That there's something that's still there. Whether it's a true haunting or it's just that kind of after-effect. There're people who believe that fervently, and I think, you know... So it couldn't hurt to maybe do a little research about that specific area, but...

MICAH

Yeah, that's... that's definitely the plan. I think the... I think the thing that's keeping me from diving right into it, is that... You know... You know it's always scarier when it's not a ghost, and that it's a person.

W. HADEN BLACKMAN

Right.

MICAH

And... it's some... some person, or some people out there. And I think that... you know, that's a little... that's a little bit more unnerving to me is to find out that, like, I'm not making it up. That Luke's not making it up. And... and that it wasn't a ghost after all. At this point, I... I would really like for it to be. [nervous laughter]

W. HADEN BLACKMAN

Yeah. Yeah.

MICAH

You know? I think it would be a lot... It would be a lot less terrifying to put it to bed, in that sense. No pun intended. Because I can't sleep.

W. HADEN BLACKMAN

Right. Well. If it's any consolation, I mean, the... the Grinning Man stuff um... although people linked him to kind of a rise in kind of anti-social behavior in the areas where he appeared. And there are reports of spates of violence, and you know, bar fights and things like that, around the time that he was spotted in those areas that were, I guess, previously tranquil and didn't have those kinds of problems. You know, there was never any... violence directly linked to him, right? There was never any... any, you know, reports of him attacking anyone--

MICAH

Yeah, yeah.

W. HADEN BLACKMAN

--directly, that I... that I found. It was more of just that kind of, he's standing there staring at us and grinning at us in this

very malevolent uh... you know, unsettling way, right? And then you know, people ran and felt like they were being pursued. But who knows how much of that is... you know, was kind of blown out of proportion, right? So.

MICAH

Right. Well. If that's what it is, I'll take it.

W. HADEN BLACKMAN

Yeah, right. Exactly.

MICAH

I will. Because you know the path that we've been on has been scary, for sure, I think.

W. HADEN BLACKMAN

Yeah.

MICAH

You know, just like... You know, based on what he said and you know, I... I actually asked the, you know, people who might be listening to reach out and call me if they have... if they have stories, so um... And, you know, I've got my... You know I've got my fair share of like... of prank calls. But you know, nothing yet. So maybe I'll have... I'll have something to report, you know, in the coming weeks.

W. HADEN BLACKMAN

Well, good luck. I mean, I think uh... You know, all I can say is, in all the research I did, there's definitely stuff out there that we have a hard time explaining. And may never explain. So whether, again, that's ghost sightings, or the... you know that kind of the... the consistency of sightings of things like Mothman, or the Grinning Man were... Across multiple sightings, across multiple locations, the descriptions were so similar.

Um... so. Hey. You know, I applaud you for continuing to... to do the research, though. Because, again the more we can kind of dive into this stuff, hopefully the more we know about ourselves and about the world around us, and you know...

MICAH

Yeah, for sure. And I think that um... I think that my... my sort of mantra right now is to just keep looking.

W. HADEN BLACKMAN

Yep.

MICAH

So that's... that's what I'll have to do. And... and thank you again for... you know for responding to my email. You have a very illustrious career and I know that you're taking out a lot of time to talk to me. And I... So I have to say thank you for being on my tiny little podcast from Providence.

W. HADEN BLACKMAN

No, I... I really appreciate it. The books is the first thing I ever wrote and published and it was a long time ago. But I have a real soft spot for it, so I was ecstatic to hear that um... that you know, you guys were actually sharing it and reading it and you know... or had [inaudible] of it.

MICAH

My friend Elia loves it.

W. HADEN BLACKMAN

Yeah, well I... I'm glad... I'm glad for that. And again, it was meant to be kind of tongue-in-cheek, but there's a lot of cool stuff out there for... I think for people to explore and uh... I don't know. I'm glad that it brought some joy, there. And if it helps kind of put you on the right path to figuring some of the stuff that happened, then that's... you know, even better. So.

MICAH

Yeah. Thank you, again.

Guys, I've been talking to W. Haden Blackman. And he's the best for letting me give him a call. Thank you so, so much.

W. HADEN BLACKMAN

Thank you.

[SCENE TRANSITION]

[OUTRO MUSIC BEGINS]

Transcription by [Evelyn Archer](#).

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