SPOOKY

Of course, what I'm about to tell you could only have happened on Halloween night, right? What follows is a true -- possibly even a paranormal -- occurrence.

It was October 31, 2023. I was working as a reference librarian at one of my libraries -- specifically the Vacaville Cultural Center Library in northern California, doing the 4-8 p.m. shift.

The shift was initially quite busy, but I found a brief moment to chat with one of our regular patrons, a pleasant woman in her mid-60s who comes in to type up and print off various documents on our public-access computers. The time was around 7:10 p.m.

I asked her if she knew that the world-famous magician Harry Houdini died from a ruptured appendix at the age of 52 on Halloween night in Detroit in 1926. She hadn't.

"Really? I'd like to hear about that!" she admitted.

So I proceeded to share the tale which years ago I used to tell my fifth grade students every Halloween -- during our usual classroom party, with the windows darkened and the lights turned off, and a sole scented candle flickering eerily on my desk:

"Houdini told his beloved wife, Bess, on his deathbed that -- if it was possible -- he would try to contact her from beyond the grave. He whispered in her ear the secret passwords: *Rosabelle Believe*, explaining that hearing those precise words was the only way she could be certain that it was him, and him alone, trying to communicate with her.

Bess had hope that she would somehow hear from her dear Harry after he was buried following an elaborate public funeral. Thus, for every Halloween night nine years in a row, she held a special seance at her home with selected friends -- led by a psychic 'medium' -- in an attempt to contact her husband's spirit. Naturally, she was sad and disappointed when each session failed.

Bess said she would try one final time, however. She arranged for the nation's most famous psychic medium -- Arthur Ford -- to facilitate this last seance. The date was October 31, 1937. Two well-regarded newspaper reporters were also invited to attend, as official witnesses.

Ford went into his trance, in a darkened parlor room, with Bess and the six other attendees holding hands with him in a circle around a large table. A single candle helped cast dimmed shadows in the anticipated paranormal setting.

After several moments of silence, Ford's voice shifted, and spoke in a changed resonance. He asked if Bess was there. She responded, Yes.

'I have a message for you then from your loving husband,' the voice continued. 'I am therefore compelled to say these words:

*Rosabelle Believe*.'

Well, Bess Houdini was stunned and began to weep. The seance was abruptly halted, the parlor lights turned back on, the lone candle extinguished, and the assembled company dismissed. After this dramatic paranormal session, Bess never wanted to talk about the eerie experience or hold another seance again...and she never did. Subsequent reports swore that the event really occurred as detailed, while others claimed that it was simply a fanciful hoax and never happened."

[Bess died six years later of a heart attack on February 11, 1943 at the age of 67. Her being a Catholic, her surviving relatives (she and Harry were childless) forbade her from being buried next to her husband, who was interred in a Jewish cemetery in New York. As a result, Bess Houdini now rests in a Catholic cemetery some thirty-five miles away.]

My library patron said she found the story quite fascinating! I concluded my (blessedly, non-interrupted) interlude with an bonus tidbit: I told her that my first serious girlfriend, Vivian Davis, and I (circa 1967-1970, during high school in Chicago, and briefly, at college) had talked about this exact Houdini seance story on several occasions. We vowed that if one of us should die before the other, we would somehow try to communicate from beyond the grave, just like the master magician. Such was the whimsy of teenagers in love!

Sadly, Vivian -- after unsuccessfully trying her luck at a theater career for many years in New York City -- died in 2012 from lung cancer at the age 61 in Elmhurst, Illinois. We gratefully exchanged lengthy and emotional emails shortly before her death. But out of respect for her husband and because of my living with my wife in California, I didn't attend the burial. Vivian, like Bess Houdini, never had any children.

Now here is where my true tale, while still at the library, took a shocking turn. To this day, I have no rational explanation for what occurred.

It was around 7:25 p.m. The library was slowly beginning to empty itself. We would be closing at 8:00 p.m.

I was thinking about the upcoming trip to Saudi Arabia that my wife and I would be taking in January -- a twelve-day tour with a group of twelve curious fellow adventurers. Because of the sudden outbreak of war on October 7th between Israel and Hamas terrorists in the Palestinian Gaza Strip, I worried that our tour might get cancelled if the fighting intensified and widened in the Middle East. Thus, I thought I would take a quick moment and look on a website offering a two-week cruise and tour of Sicily and Malta as a possible alternative trip -- two places I have also yet to visit. I found a suitable group tour site from an organization called the Archeological Institute of America.

Scanning the web pages, I found a form that could be filled out to request more trip information and also to be placed on the Institute's emailing list. I clicked my computer's mouse to place its cursor on the top opening box to type in my name.

The box opened, however, with just one name, in full, already typed in:

*Vivian Davis*

My eyes popped out, my jaw dropped, and my eyebrows shot up. I was stunned! I had just been thinking about her and talking about her. Yet here -- on a work computer with my unique log-in password, on website in the year 2023, with none of the other 176 Solano County Library employees sharing that fateful name -- was a possible notice from my dearest first love, who died in 2012...

Was she trying to tell me that her spirit still existed somewhere, or that she was still thinking fondly of me -- even from beyond the grave?

With my mind and heart racing, I clicked again on the name insert box on the web form. Vivian's name had vanished. I slowly regained my composure, and filled out the email form with my name and address, and hit the submit button. I quickly turned my focus to help other patrons find their books, answered a few telephone reference inquiries, and aided those people having some technology issues. Next, it was time for me to make the closing announcements and shut down all the library public and staff computers.

After I and my three coworkers locked up and left the building, I drove home east on the busy I-80 Freeway, with a huge, brownish-orange, three-quarter moon rising on the horizon. It was about four times its usual size -- a temporary atmospheric distortion -- but its spectacle was dramatically memorable for this special night.

My spooky experience further disturbed me when I got home. I went back on the Archeological Institute of America's website -- one-at-a-time, first on my laptop, then on my iPad, and finally on my iPhone -- to see if Vivian's name appeared again.

It never did.

The following week, back at work at the same library at my same reference desk computer, I tried the same thing on the same website.

Nothing unusual.

I guess that there are some things in this world that defy any rational explanation. Could my subconscious have forced her name to appear, mysteriously and completely typed in, as a kind of 'wish fulfillment?'

What do you think?

The word *spooky* doesn't even begin to define what happened that Halloween. Rather than being pleasant and comforting, however, my unexpected experience was more startling and disturbing -- perhaps something like what Bess Houdini felt.

But one thing is certain: I'll never forget what happened...

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

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