VIDEO SURPRISE

I live in a college town on the West coast, so there are always small shops and businesses opening and closing in our downtown area.

The other day, I noticed that a new place had opened between a comics/trading card store and a Panera bakery-restaurant. The main sign out front proclaimed: Twilight Video. Below, in smaller lettering, it said: A Vintage VHS Movie Rental Heaven. All videos $1 each for one week.

Being a devoted movie fan – and owning an older VHS tape player as well as a DVD player – I decided to stop in and check out the new store.

The selection was vast because the store was quite large, having once been a Blockbuster video store before that rental chain went out of business nationwide. I wondered how long this establishment would last, given how many people had switched from VHS to DVD, Netflix, live-streaming on Hulu and Amazon, and so forth. Yet $1 for a video for a week was undeniably an attractive draw, especially for the eternally cash-strapped college students in our town.

I went to the front counter to apply for a borrower’s membership card. I was met by a friendly female clerk in her mid-20’s. She had silver-frosted, spiked hair, silver lip gloss with matching eye shadow, dark eyes with long eyelashes, and one eyebrow was pierced with a small silver ring ornament. She was stylishly dressed in all black, with matching black nail polish and five silver rings on various fingers. Her name badge said: Sylvia.

“Hi! Can I help you?” she inquired, perkily.

“Um, yes, um…Sylvia. I’d like to apply for a membership card,” I replied.

“Great! I’ll need to see an I.D. please. Your driver’s license will do fine. And a credit card to keep a $20 deposit on file with us in case you skip town with one of our movies, or lose or damage one,” she explained. “But you have an honest face, so I’m not worried about any of that,” she smiled. “And seeing as we are going to be friends, you can call me ‘Silver’. Everybody does. It suits me better than formally calling me Sylvia.”

I returned her smile and pulled out my wallet and gave her the required cards. Even though I was happily married, it was fun living in a college town where attractive young women with sparkling eyes and positive energy made an old guy like me feel like I was forty years younger – if only for a moment or two.

Silver started to type my information into her desk computer. “Hmm…Jacob Nyfeld…born 1951…Hey! That makes you a Virgo too! We’ll get along just fine,” she said aloud, noticing my birth month and day.

She finished up, then printed out my official Twilight Video membership card, and handed it to me along with my driver’s license and Visa card.

“Good news, Jacob! Your first video rental is free, seeing as this is our Grand Opening week. So help yourself!” Silver smiled again, then went back to reading a large, thick hardcover book, seeing as I was the only customer at that early hour. I gestured toward her book and asked, “What are you reading, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Oh, I don’t mind…it’s all about true tales of the supernatural and the paranormal and stuff like that.” She stared deep into my eyes for a long moment, then raised her one eyebrow with the silver ring in it. “Are you by chance interested in the strange, the bizarre, and the unexpected?” She chuckled a bit, then added, “Well of course you are! You’re a Virgo, right?” She returned to her reading with keen focus.

Curiously, Silver was right. I had always been fascinated with such topics.

I left her desk and wandered down the various store aisles, looking for films that I hadn’t seen for a while. My wife, Margie, and I frankly had different tastes in movies (I was eight years older than her, so maybe it was an age thing, or maybe just the usual ‘female-male preference’ divide), so I was free to choose what I would most likely be watching alone when she was occupied with something else. After about twenty minutes of browsing, I settled on six videos: “Shane,” “West Side Story,” “Cool Hand Luke,” “Raiders of the Lost Ark,” “A Christmas Story,” and “The Fugitive.” This was a nice genre mixture of Western, Musical, Suspense, Comedy, and Action.

I took my selections back to Silver at the front desk, while noticing a few other customers wandering into the store.

“That will be $5 plus tax,” she noted, “seeing as you get one freebie.” I paid, then Silver said, ”Thanks, and I hope to see you again soon, Jacob. I bet we will have a paranormal story or two to share next time. Maybe dream interpretations, or time travel, or reincarnation, or even predictions of the future…Oh, and all of your movies are due back on the 24th.”

I scooped up my rental pile and headed for my car. The rest of my day was routine after I finished running my errands. After lunch, I did some spring yardwork with Margie in the bright May sunshine. Later, we went for a bicycle ride on the bike trail near the creek by our house. After dinner, I helped with the dishes, then settled down to watch a video in the living room while my wife knitted, made some phone calls, and listened to some podcasts on her laptop in the study off the master bedroom. Our calico cat, Taffy, followed her.

I popped “Shane” into our VCR around 7 p.m. I really enjoy a good Western, and this is one is a classic, from 1953. I hadn’t seen it in years, but it still had the power to captivate me. I eventually got to the part where our hero, Alan Ladd as Shane, finally tears into villain Jack Palance, when suddenly the movie stalled, then shifted to snowy static. My first thought was: oh, crap. One of the reasons I actually preferred VHS tapes over DVDs was because DVDs could scratch, skip, freeze, or even refuse to play over time, unless they could be kept in pristine handling conditions. VHS tapes, on the other hand, were protected inside plastic cases, so no fingers could mar the product – hence they actually stayed good much longer.

The static lasted for maybe five seconds. But what happened next totally shocked me. I was inexplicably watching a movie about myself, from my point of view, in color, sitting upright inside my baby buggy on a brisk autumn day in my old neighborhood in Chicago! For perhaps fifteen seconds, I was looking around outside at the corner Certified grocery store where my Mom had left me out front while she ran in to buy a gallon of milk, and then I looked down in curiosity at my corduroy pants and brown shoes.

The scene ended so fast, I was stunned. I had the same child-like feelings, smelled the same leaded gas exhaust from the unseen passing cars on the busy street, and sensed my tiny existence exactly as a helpless two-year-old would. Quickly, I grabbed the VCR remote control to rewind the tape, but when I did and played it forward again, the fifteen second ‘experience’ had completely vanished -- as if it was never there. I was baffled. Did I travel back in time? Did I hallucinate? Was a memory triggered from an old childhood event that I had forgotten? Was there any connection to this particular movie and my personal past? My mind was spinning…Should I tell Margie what had happened? Or would she think I was merely imagining things, or worse, that I had gone crazy? I was so confused that I lost all interest in watching the rest of “Shane.” I turned off both the VCR and the television and just sat there, thinking. After a while, I picked up the nearby copy of James Michener’s “Centennial,” which I was re-reading, so as to distract myself for the rest of the night. Later, when Margie and I climbed into bed, I decided to skip telling her about my odd experience with the videotape.

The next evening, I thought I’d give “West Side Story” a try. The strange video episode from the night before was just about forgotten. I asked Margie to join me, knowing her love of musicals (except for “Carousel,” which for some reason she dislikes), so we snuggled up on the couch with some pretzels and 7-Up to enjoy this 1961 multiple-award-winning masterpiece. The movie unfolded without incident. Soon, Tony and Maria were singing their romantic duet of “Tonight” on the tenement fire escape.

That’s when it happened. Suddenly, I was seeing myself at ten years old, playing with my fox terrier, Rocket, in our backyard of my childhood home in Chicago. It was warm and humid, so it was probably summer. I felt carefree and happy. The wind was rustling the green leaves of our big elm tree, and I saw fluffy clouds racing across the sky when I looked up. I sensed I WAS THERE, back there, for perhaps fifteen seconds. Then, in what seemed an instant, Tony and Maria were back, parting for the night in 1950s New York City. I felt queasy and disoriented.

I asked Margie if I could stop the tape and rewind it, on the pretext of me seeing the duet sung again. She agreed, and gave absolutely no indication that she had seen me ‘travel’ on the videotape for the short time I had experienced my phenomenon. When the tape was replayed, nothing extraordinary happened. Again, I was reluctant to tell my wife what I saw, so we ended the night in our usual manner.

The following night, I had mixed emotions about watching yet another video. I was both apprehensive and curious at the same time. Finally, I settled on “Cool Hand Luke” from 1967. Margie was out, visiting a neighbor down the block. The movie played normally -- yet by now, the idea was not about even watching a movie to simply relax or follow a plot, but rather to wonder if it would be dramatically interrupted as had previously occurred. Sure enough, right after Paul Newman finishes eating his fiftieth hard-boiled egg on a bet and is lying alone on a table in a crucifixion pose, the screen jumped to me kissing my first serious girlfriend, Arlene, on top of a worn wooden picnic table in a park after midnight in a small town in Illinois. I felt the intoxicating warmth of her lips, our bodies eager and aroused, the sound of crickets softly in the background. We were totally submerged in love and desire. I smelled her long hair as it hung over my face…but after about fifteen seconds, it was all taken away from me. I was angry and upset that I couldn’t stay back in that golden moment!

I took a while to get myself back under control. I was starting to see a pattern, and I didn’t even try to rewind the tape, because I knew there would be nothing about me back there with Luke and the Georgia prison chain gang. Think, Jacob, think, I said to myself…The first video was from 1953. That was when I was two years old, and I saw and felt that era. The next was from 1961, when I was ten years old, and I went back to my dog, just like that, then. Now, the last video was from 1967, and I went back to my first love at age 16. Let’s see the other years of the remaining videos, I thought. I grabbed the three unwatched tapes, and examined the boxes. The dates were 1981, 1983, and 1993. My hunch was that each movie would show me something from my real life from each of those years.

Because I knew Margie would be gone for about four more hours, I decided to watch the three remaining movies until I saw myself appear in each. Beginning with 1981’s “Raiders of the Lost Ark,” I let the tape roll. When the setting sun flashes its light beam off the Staff of Ra that Harrison Ford is holding -- indicating at the ancient city of Tanis where to dig for the lost Ark of the Covenant – I was suddenly seeing and experiencing myself instead, back at my university in Indiana, getting my business graduate degree. I was in line at DuPont Auditorium, in my gown and mortarboard, getting ready to mount the stage for my certificate. I was hot and sweaty, waiting with the other graduates. I looked back and saw my proud parents in the guest section. Names were being called in alphabetical order, and graduation music was playing in the background. And after fifteen seconds, as before, it was over. Gone.

I ejected that tape and quickly put in 1983’s “A Christmas Story.” Right after the green-eyed braggart and bully Scott Farkus, on a dare, gets his tongue stuck on the school’s metal flag pole in the middle of winter, I was visually shifted to being at the altar of Saints Peter and Paul Church, getting married to my new bride, Margie. I saw her exactly as I had seen her thirty-three years ago. She was smiling and radiant as we prepared to exchange our vows, supervised by kindly, white-haired Father Russell. Then that tender scene also vanished after fifteen seconds or so.

The last movie I had rented was “The Fugitive,” from 1993. During the scene when the innocent Dr. Richard Kimball, played by Harrison Ford, jumps off the high dam wall into the river below -- rather than surrender to U.S. Marshall Tommy Lee Jones – I was all too briefly swept to the afternoon September scene of my wife giving birth to our first daughter, Jasmine, at Mayfield General Hospital. Pink and slippery at seven pounds, our baby had just taken her first breath and let out a cry when the scene, now predictively, disappeared.

When Margie came home just past 10 p.m., I knew I still couldn’t tell her what I had seen and what I had experienced. There would certainly come a time for that striking revelation, but not yet. I needed more time to figure out these remarkable events.

But I had to talk to someone about these disturbing happenings, and that person would have to be Silver. Could she possibly shed any light on what was going on with me and these mysterious videos?

I returned all six tapes the following day when Twilight Video opened its doors at 10 a.m. I was relieved when I spied Silver working at the front desk. She recognized me and smiled. Was her smile innocent? Knowing? Enigmatic? Sinister? I had to trust somebody, nevertheless, so it might as well be her, by default. I waited about ten minutes until the store was empty of other customers, then went into a several minute retelling of the last three nights. Could she offer any possible explanation or theory?

“Well, Jacob, something very unusual has certainly occurred here, definitely related to your psyche. Either the tapes are somehow bewitched -- in a beneficial way, of course, for there appears to be no evil or dark forces at work here – or your own psychic energies are being projected onto the tape itself somehow, and for some unknown purpose,” Silver offered. She sounded both knowledgeable and professional in her theories. But how could that be, in someone so young?

“Wait…um…look, I have something special for you, as one Virgo to another,” she added. Silver left her desk and went into a back staff room. She returned with a video. “This is my favorite movie, my own personal copy. I would like to lend it to you. It is from 1980. Maybe you have even seen it before. It is called “Somewhere in Time.” She handed the tape to me, and our hands briefly touched in the exchange. “No Charge,” she smiled, and winked with her dark eye under her pierced eyebrow. “Return it whenever.”

I was very aware of this movie, and had seen it several times. I had even visited the filming location at the Grand Hotel on Mackinaw Island in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula. A yearly gathering of the movie’s fans still occurred even today, often with the few surviving stars of the film in attendance. There was even a room in the hotel filled with movie stills, local newspaper articles, and other memorabilia.

I thanked Silver and took the tape home. That night, I watched it, with Taffy sitting on my lap while Margie was at her once-a-week charity quilting group. I watched for anything related to my own life in 1980 to show up, for that seemed the pattern thus far. But right during the scene where Christopher Reeve inadvertently removes the modern-day penny from his 1900s vest pocket to show his love Jane Seymour, instead of brief snowy static followed by fifteen seconds of my past life from 1980, I saw myself hit by some kind of truck! I actually felt physical pain, followed by everything going black into unconsciousness. Plus the video stayed black for the rest of the movie, which -- from how I remembered it -- was about more ten minutes.

I was very frightened and disturbed. The minute Margie came home, I bombarded her with the whole story of the last four days. She was as baffled and perplexed as me.

“Honey, I have no explanation. Frankly, all of it frightens me, especially the last incident. Is a video somehow predicting your death? That’s crazy! How could that be?” she said in confusion and exasperation.

“I don’t know, Margie. Look…I was twenty-nine years old in 1980. So maybe the number 29 has some special significance. Maybe I am supposed to die in 29 hours, or in 29 days from the time I first watched the last videotape, or on the 29th of some month,” I offered.

“Well, Jacob, the 29th of this month is coming up soon. Although neither one of us is very superstitious, I think it would be prudent for you to stay safely inside the house, especially on that day, because that way no truck can hit you and…kill you…” her voice trailed off, and her eyes filled with tears as the fear of something dreadful like that really occurring hit her.

Margie and I ultimately decided that I should stay inside entirely every day up until and including the 29th of May – just to be 100% safe. On that last day, I was particularly paranoid and restless. I was also getting cabin fever from being cooped up indoors. But nothing unusual – let alone deadly, thank God -- happened that day.

A few more days passed with me staying indoors before I began to forget about the number 29. Maybe it was all meaningless, or idiotic, or some kind of foolish, cruel prank. I thought about watching “Somewhere in Time” again, but it had originally been so disturbing that I pushed that thought far out of my mind. Maybe I needed to talk with Silver again, and this time bring Margie with me? While I mulled various options and plans in my mind, Margie had to make a run to Safeway for some groceries. She asked if I could open the front screen door after she left to let in some warm May sun and fresh air, so I did.

I heard Stan, our mailman, opening our mailbox with his delivery around 11:30 a.m. When I opened the front screen door to retrieve it, I saw a strange, large male cat run across our lawn. But before I knew it, Taffy had run out the open door from between my legs. Damn! Naturally, I went outside to yell at her and chase her back into the house.

You should know that we live on a corner lot near a busy thoroughfare. As I yelled Taffy’s name, a brown UPS truck came dangerously racing down the street. As it turned our corner, the driver somehow lost control and his delivery truck jumped the curb at high speed right into me. I froze as I felt it hit me, horribly realizing the inevitable and the predicted. Then everything went black…

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I was in the hospital for four days. A broken left arm, three broken ribs, some internal injuries, a concussion, and assorted scrapes and bruises. But I was alive! Margie took the best care of me at home, and I was good to walk around outdoors and to drive again after about eight weeks. My regular retirement routine quickly resumed after that.

It was around then that I felt the strong need to see Silver again, and to tell her about what had happened. Did she already know, somehow? Did her loaned tape predict my accident, did it try to warn me, or did it actually cause everything to happen? Needless to say, I wanted to give the damn tape back to her…

But when I went downtown to Twilight Video, I discovered that it was gone. A new sign proclaiming: Peet’s Coffee Shop, Coming Soon! was there instead. When I asked the Panera staff next door if they knew where I could find Silver, they didn’t have a clue.

I never saw Silver again.

When I got home and told Margie, she suggested we watch the “Somewhere in Time” video again. We did, and it was perfectly normal.

Margie then explained that she kept some curious information about my accident from me until I had fully recovered. She had me sit down on the living room couch. Taffy joined us, purring.

“Jacob, I have to tell you that the license plate on the UPS truck was SIT1980. And the police told me that the driver, who was unhurt, was…twenty-nine years old…

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

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