

## **My Night Alone in a Haunted Mansion**

Being a Completely True Account of an Encounter  
with the Spirit of Eda Jordan

During a Cold and Lonely Night Passed by the Author  
at Much Risk to Himself in the Historic Jordan House  
In the Town of West Des Moines in the State of Iowa  
on a Thursday the Tenth Day of February Two Thousand and Five

*by Allan Wolf*

I recently spent a glorious week in the city of West Des Moines, Iowa. I visited students at Stillwell Junior High School and a high school called Walnut Creek Campus. I did poetry “shows” for younger kids at the Marshalltown YMCA and the West Des Moines Public Library. On Friday, I took part in a reader’s theatre production of my novel *New Found Land*, read by four actors. I signed books at Barnes and Nobel, did a couple interviews, and even had a chance to brainstorm ideas with an excellent group of teenagers, who helped me work out a few details for my novel in progress, *ZANE’S TRACE*. To write about my whole week would take more ink than I have in my pen, so I’ll keep it simple and focus only on Thursday night. That’s the night I spent, alone, in a haunted house!

That Thursday night was special for two reasons: One, it was the first night I had ever spent in a haunted house; and, two, it was the first time during my visit to West Des Moines that I had been alone.

From the minute I had arrived in town to the moment I was deposited on the steps of the haunted mansion, I had been among people, a *lot* of people. Receptions, workshops, presentations, book signings, classroom visits, interviews, breakfast, lunch, and dinner. I’m not complaining. (I DID sleep and shower by myself.) I only mention this to illustrate the drastic contrast between my prior four days and the absolute solitude and quiet of the Jordan House on that night as I moved through the mansion’s ante-bellum rooms.

The Jordan House was built in 1850 by James Jordan who eventually became rich selling cattle and hogs. As his wealth grew, so did his family, and so did his house. His first wife, Melinda, birthed six children before she died. His second wife, Cynthia, birthed five more, including twin girls, Eda and Eva. It is Eda whose spirit still walks the halls, they say, holding a white cat. In 1863, when Eda was just three years old, she slid down the banister and took a fatal fall. Anyone who does not believe in ghosts should ask the opinion of Cynthia, or any parent who has lost a child. They will tell you different.

But would Eda reveal herself to *me*? For those of you who want to cut to the chase and go watch your favorite TV show, I'll tell you up front that she DID reveal herself to me. For those of you who want to know the facts of the matter, read on.

I had with me a flashlight, a suitcase, my journal, and a video camera. That's about it. My plan was to sleep in the huge ornate bed in the large master bedroom upstairs. I had been working hard all week and was very, very tired, so I set about my work at once. The day I arrived I was given a private tour of the place, learning much of its history. So with camera rolling, I walked through the house providing commentary as I went.

"This is the formal parlor, where weddings and funerals were held."

I imagined Eda's coffin there and the weeping, the sorrow.

"This piano is original to the house."

I sat down to play (*French Children's Song* if you were wondering) but stopped. The piano was out of tune, and besides that, I needed silence. I wanted to hear the house, wanted to hear the banister creak—in case it did.

I walked from the formal parlor into the "everyday" parlor, the dining room, the library, the kitchen, up the front stairs (*the* stairs) through the many bedrooms, down a second staircase, all the while talking softly to the camera and watching for the three-year-old with the white cat. And all the while thinking my wild thoughts. My own daughter is three years old. My own daughter *loves* cats. If my own daughter died, wouldn't my longing alone be sufficient to bring her spirit back to me? If I were to be robbed of her body, could I not at least have her spirit? My son, now five, had nearly died from spinal meningitis. But he survived in body and in spirit both. I made a note to love him more.

My thoughts went on like that for an hour or so as I went through the huge sprawling house, getting lost at every turn. Countless times I entered a doorway only to discover I was not at all where I thought I should be. It seemed the house was playing tricks on me, reminding me that I was just a visitor.

No. Houses don't play tricks. It was my mind. My mind was playing tricks on me. That is nothing new. That's why I became a writer. Still, it seemed Eda was not going to make an appearance. I turned off the camera and walked back downstairs. Then I noticed an open door that led down to the cellar.

I knew from my tour that these stairs connected the ground floor to the house's original kitchen. This was likely where Cynthia would

have been when Eda had her accident. The original kitchen was accessible only from the outside. It was only later, after Eda's death, that these stairs were added giving access from the inside. Today the door to the new cellar steps opens very near the front hall where young Eda must have landed, breaking her neck.

If these stairs had existed that day in 1863, if this door had been ajar in 1863 as it was now, I wondered to myself if Cynthia could have heard the little girl's shrieks before she fell. And having heard them, would these convenient steps have allowed her to arrive on the scene in time to break her daughter's fall? (The next morning, I would trace the steps from the original kitchen entrance around the outside yard, onto the porch, through the house's front door—it's a long way.)

So there I was looking down the stairs into the dark cellar. Nothing to do but descend. I found the light switch, and down I went. To the left at the bottom of the stairs was the original 1850's kitchen. To the right was an extra room that had been transformed, by the Iowa Historical Society, into an Underground Railroad Museum.

I should mention now that James Jordan was a staunch abolitionist who opened his house to all travelers, regardless of race. Before the civil war, Jordan House had become a "station" on the Underground Railroad. John Brown himself had stopped here at least twice before his fateful raid on Harper's Ferry. No one is quite sure if the black freedom-seekers stayed in the house or in some long-gone out-building on the grounds.

As I entered the dark museum space I wondered if runaway slaves had at one time huddled here in the dark. And then, of course, there was Eda. Had her spirit huddled there with them? I reached for the light switch and walked into the room. As the lights went on, my feet turned to stone and my heart nearly leapt from my chest. It was not what I saw, but something I heard that made me freeze.

The instant I turned on the light the small room was filled with a loud cacophony of voices wailing as if in agony! The din quickly congealed into what I recognized as a ragged chorus of slaves singing a spiritual, weary yet hopeful, with coded words about freedom, chains, and the Promised Land.

It wasn't Eda after all. The ghosts that haunted Jordan House were the spirits of slaves escaping north!

I must tell you now that I am a skeptic when it comes to supernatural matters. I have yet to meet a typical ghost more frightening than those who haunt the corners of my own mind. It only took me an

instant to realize that the voices I was hearing came from small audio speakers hanging on the walls. The music had been recorded on a cassette deck, activated by the same switch that had turned on the lights. Once turned on, the sluggish reels of the tape took an instant to reach proper speed, distorting the sound, and thus creating a convincing “tortured souls in hell” effect.

I laughed at myself and began to take in the museum. I eventually came to a curious wooden crate, a replica of the crate in which Henry “Box” Brown had mailed himself on a 29-hour journey from slavery in Richmond to freedom in Philadelphia. I’ll try just about anything once. I figured, well, why not? What else do you have planned for the night? So I climbed into the crate and pulled its lid into place. I had just enough room to curl up. I regretted not removing my wallet from my back pocket before I climbed in. There was only room for me. And now, more so than ever, I was totally, completely, and utterly alone. No one else would fit. Not even little Eda. Not even little Eda’s cat.

My watch has a light-up dial that told me the time—it was now just a few minutes till midnight. I was too tired to be frightened by that. There in my little box, in that damp cellar, beneath that empty haunted house, on that snowy February night—I fell asleep.

And *that* is how the story ends.

Wait! Wait! I hear you say. What about midnight? What about the escaping slaves? The dark cellar? The spooky parlor? And what about Eda and her phantom cat?

Okay. Okay. If you really must know. But I *warn* you now. I’m going to tell you the entire truth. What happened *after* I woke and rose from that box. What I saw in that front hall by the banister. If you DO NOT want to know the truth of the matter (and thus the key to all life and history) then TURN BACK NOW!

Otherwise, read on.

I woke up after midnight. My watch (and my sore back) told me that I had been asleep for about forty-five minutes in my little wooden womb. As I left the box and climbed the cellar stairs, it began to dawn on me that this old house could easily be at the center of some future book.

I returned to the front hallway where Eda had taken her fall. A podium stood in the corner holding up a guest register. As I looked it over I was taken aback by a signature there: *Eda Jordan*. Just for a second. The blink of an eye. Then I saw the truth of the thing—not Eda Jordan, but

Allan Wolf. It was my own signature that I saw. I had signed the register the day I arrived in West Des Moines during a Sunday evening reception, before my private tour. I had forgotten it altogether. So much had transpired since then it seemed as if it was a lifetime ago. And here was my signature, a ghost of who I had been four days earlier.

Then it struck me that it was *me* who was the ghost. This memory of who I had been before I was transformed by all the people I had met during my visit to West Des Moines. The teachers. The librarians. The students. The remarkable faculty of Walnut Creek Campus and Stillwell Junior High. Even the Mayor.

I turned to examine a genealogical chart hanging on the wall, an illustration of the Jordan family tree. There was little Eda's branch—barely a sprout really. There she was. As much of a ghost as I would ever see. In her own way she *did* reveal her spirit to me, though not as an apparition. Her spirit was there in my own signature, evidence that I had met the challenges of the past four days. Her spirit was in my son when he had survived spinal meningitis, when he chose to live on and to die another day. Her spirit was with Henry Brown when he emerged from his crate to inhale his first breath of freedom.

Perhaps there is too much talk of the ghost of a little girl who fell off a banister, and not enough talk of the spirit of a girl who had dared to take life on a little joy ride. In our own way, we are all going for a ride down the banister. Us and Eda Jordan and Eda Jordan's wonderful white cat. Climb aboard, but hold on tight. And remember no matter how tight we hold on we *still* might fall off before we reach the end. So we may as well enjoy the ride.

Boo!