Who Was Harry Houdini?
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For Cosmo and George, modern-day magicians—TTS

For Tess—JO’B
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Who was Harry Houdini?

Most people know that he was a famous magician—but did you know that he was also a movie star, a pilot, an acrobat, and a writer?

Harry Houdini (pronounced hoo-DEE-nee) didn’t even really like the word “magician.” He preferred to call himself an “escape artist.” He said he could break out of anything—handcuffs, jail cells, straitjackets, chains, padlocked boxes, iron cages, anything! People challenged Houdini to escape from all sorts of weird things in all sorts of weird places. And he always succeeded!

Why do people still find him so fascinating? For one thing, a lot of what he did has never been done by anyone else. Many of his tricks are still mysteries. And he told so many fantastic stories about his life that sometimes it’s hard to know what was true and what wasn’t. We also
don’t know why he did all the crazy and dangerous things that he did. Was it to impress people? Was it because he thought it would make him rich? Or was it because he wanted to be the best in the world at something—and he wanted the world to know it? Harry Houdini was certainly a very talented escape artist. More importantly, he was determined. What Houdini wanted, Houdini got. And Houdini wanted attention—lots of it!

In a time before television and movies, Harry Houdini became famous all over the world. Everybody knew who he was. He made sure of that! Can you imagine somebody getting famous today without using TV, computers, or movies?

But being famous was very important to Houdini—and his dream came true. Even now, more than 75 years after his death, he is still the most famous magician who ever lived.
Chapter 1
So You Want to Be an American

The year was 1886. A twelve-year-old boy stood on the platform at a train station. He was small but muscular and tough-looking, with dark hair, bright blue-grey eyes, and a frown on his face.

He was not where he meant to be.

He had hopped on a train in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, several hundred miles to the north. His plan was to get to Texas—where he thought the train was going. Along the way, he had sent his mother a postcard.

But this was not Texas. The sign on the platform clearly said: “Kansas City, Missouri.” Somehow, he had ended up on the wrong train. And now here he was, hundreds of miles and several states away from Texas.

What could he do?

He’d have to make the best of it. After all, he had run away from home so he could earn more money for his family. He planned to run errands, shine shoes, do any jobs he could find. Surely he could do that just as well in Missouri as he could in Texas. So off he went to town, looking for a place to sleep.
In the years to come, this boy would travel a lot farther than Kansas City, Missouri. The nickels and dimes he planned to bring home to his family would one day be hundreds and thousands of dollars. But then, at that point, the young shoeshine boy could never have imagined that one day he’d be a world-famous magician. He had trouble just earning enough money to eat!

Harry Houdini’s childhood is full of stories that may or may not be true. He was born on March 24, 1874, in Budapest, Hungary. His real name was Ehrich Weiss. But during his lifetime, Harry always said his birthday was April 6, because that is what his mother told him. And sometimes he said he was born in America—depending on which reporter he was talking to!

In those days, many people in Europe thought of America as a magical place where all their problems would be solved. Thousands came to the United States from Europe hoping to make a new start in life—and lots of money, too. Harry’s father was one of them.

His name was Mayer Samuel Weiss, and he was a rabbi, a teacher of the Jewish religion. It was hard to be a Jew living in Hungary, where people and laws treated them like second-class citizens and it was difficult to get a job. The Weiss family was very poor. Samuel thought that perhaps he could do better in America. After all, people called it the “land of opportunity.” So in 1876, when Ehrich was two years old, Samuel left his wife and sons in Hungary. Although he did not speak a word of English, he set off for America, on the other side of the ocean. It took him two years to save enough money to bring over his family.

Can you imagine what that trip must have been like? First, Harry’s mother, Cecilia, and her four sons would have had to get from Hungary to a port city. From there they would board a ship, along with as many as two thousand other people bound for America. Big ships like these took anywhere from two weeks to two months to cross the Atlantic Ocean. The passengers had
to deal with crowded conditions and limited food. For the rest of his life, Houdini hated traveling by boat.
The Statue of Liberty now stands in New York City’s harbor welcoming newcomers to the United States. But it wasn’t built yet when Ehrich and the Weiss family arrived. America was a big, strange, new world—and now it was Ehrich’s new home.

Unfortunately, life wasn’t much easier in the United States. From New York, the Weisses went to live in Wisconsin, first in a small town called Appleton, and later in the city of Milwaukee. When he was only eight years old, Ehrich started working to help pay the bills. He sold newspapers, shined shoes, and ran errands. At age nine, he also had his first starring act in a backyard circus that he put together with his friends. He called himself “The Prince of the Air” and did stunts on a homemade trapeze hung from a tree. Later, he made up stories for reporters about this time. He would either say he had been in a real traveling circus as a boy, or that he was already performing his famous escapes at age nine! The truth is he wasn’t really interested in magic yet. But he liked the acrobatics—and the applause.

Not much is known about Ehrich’s adventures as a runaway, except that he definitely left home for a while when he was twelve. He may have run away from home more than once, even though he loved his family very much. He always planned to return once he had some money.
Living and traveling on his own made Ehrich resourceful and clever. So when Samuel moved to New York City in 1887, hoping for better luck there, he picked thirteen-year-old Ehrich to take with him (even though he wasn’t the oldest son). Together they raised enough money so that the rest of the family could join them.

But Samuel Weiss died in 1892, leaving his wife with six children to care for. Still, Ehrich was sure he could help out his family. America had not been the land of opportunity for his father, but Ehrich was determined that it would be for him.

Also, before he died, his dad made Ehrich promise something—to always take care of his mother. Ehrich took any promise very seriously, and this one most of all. For the rest of her life, Cecilia Weiss could depend on her “truant son.”

There’s one story about his childhood that Harry Houdini loved to tell in later years. Whether or not it’s true, it certainly sounds like his style. One day in December, while Ehrich was working as a messenger boy, he had an idea. He wrote out a card and stuck it to his hat.
The words on the card were:

*Christmas is coming*
*Turkeys are fat*
*Please drop a quarter*
*In the Messenger Boy’s hat.*

Lots of people laughed and gave him quarters. That night, when he got home, he hid all the quarters in his hair and in his clothes. Then he went to his mother and said, “Shake me! I’m magic!” So she did. Quarters came flying out and went rolling all over the place—like magic!

Then, when he was about sixteen, Ehrich came across a book called *The Memoirs of Robert-Houdin, Ambassador, Author, and Conjuror, Written by Himself.* It was the autobiography of a very famous nineteenth-century French magician. It was full of fantastic stories. Ehrich was hooked.
If Robert-Houdin could become so famous through magic, then Ehrich Weiss could, too! But he’d need a catchy stage name. His family called him “Ehrie” (short for Ehrich). That sounded like Harry. And “Houdin” was a name that already made people think of magic. So Harry added an “i” to the end, and tada! Harry Houdini was born.