



Return to Pleasure Island

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Return to Pleasure Island

George twiddled his thumbs in his booth and watched how the brown, clayey knuckles danced ovetop of one another. Not as supple as they had once been, his thumbs — no longer the texture of wet clay on a potter's wheel; more like clay after it had been worked to exhausted crackling and brittleness. He reached into the swirling vortex of the cotton-candy machine with his strong right hand and caught the stainless-steel sweep-arm. The engines whined and he felt them strain against his strong right arm, like a live thing struggling to escape a trap. Still strong, he thought, still strong, and he released the sweep-arm to go back to spinning sugar into floss.

A pack of boys sauntered down the midway, laughing and calling, bouncing high on sugar and g-stresses. One of them peeled off from the group and ran to his booth, still laughing at some cruelty. He put his palms on George's counter and pushed against it, using them to lever his little body in a high-speed pogo. "Hey, mister," he said, "how about some three-color swirl, with sprinkles?"

George smiled and knocked the rack of paper cones with his strong right elbow, jostled it so one cone spun high in the air, and he caught it in his quick left hand. "Coming riiiiight up," he sang, and flipped the cone into the floss-machine. He spun a beehive of pink, then layered it with stripes of blue and green. He reached for the nipple that dispensed the sprinkles, but before he turned its spigot, he said, "Are you sure you don't want a dip, too? Fudge? Butterscotch? Strawberry?"

The boy bounced even higher, so that he was nearly vaulting the counter. "All three! All three!" he said.

George expertly spiraled the floss through the dips, then applied a thick crust of sprinkles. "Open your mouth, kid!" he shouted, with realistic glee.

The boy opened his mouth wide, so that the twinkling lights of the midway reflected off his back molars and the pool of saliva on his tongue. George's quick, clever left hand dipped a long-handled spoon into the hot fudge, then flipped the sticky gob on a high arc that terminated perfectly in the boy's open mouth. The boy swallowed and laughed goeely. George handed over the dripping confection in his strong right hand, and the boy plunged his face into it. When he whirled and ran to rejoin his friends, George saw that his ears were already getting longer, and his delighted laugh had sounded a little like a bray. A job well done,

he thought, and watched the rain spatter the spongy rubber cobbles of the midway.

George was supposed to go off-shift at midnight. He always showed up promptly at noon, but he rarely left as punctually. The soft one who had the midnight-to-six shift was lazy and late, and generally staggered in at twelve thirty, grumbling about his tiredness. George knew how to deal with the soft ones, though — his father had brought him up surrounded by them, so that he spoke without his father's thick accent, so that he never inadvertently crushed their soft hands when he shook with them, so that he smiled good-naturedly and gave up a realistic facsimile of sympathy when they griped their perennial gripes.

His father! How wise the old man had been, and how proud, and how stupid. George shucked his uniform backstage and tossed it into a laundry hamper, noting with dismay how brown the insides were, how much of himself had eroded away during his shift. He looked at his clever left thumb and his strong right thumb, and tasted their good, earthy tastes, and then put them away. He dressed himself in the earth-coloured dungarees and workshirt that his own father had stolen from a laundry line when he left the ancestral home of George's people for the society of the soft ones.

He boarded a Cast Member tram that ran through the ultidors underneath Pleasure Island's midway, and stared aimlessly at nothing as the soft ones on the tram gabbled away, as the tram sped away to the Cast housing, and then it was just him and the conductor, all the way to the end of the line, to the cottage he shared with his two brothers, Bill and Joe. The conductor wished him a good night when he debarked, and he shambled home.

Bill was already home, napping in the pile of blankets that all three brothers shared in the back room of the cottage. Joe wasn't home yet, even though his shift finished earlier than theirs. He never came straight home; instead, he wandered backstage, watching the midway through the peepholes. Joe's Lead had spoken to George about it, and George had spoken to Joe, but you couldn't tell Joe anything. George thought of how proud his father had been, having three sons — three! George, the son of his strong right thumb, and Bill, the son of his clever left thumb, and Joe. Joe, the son of his tongue, an old man's folly, that left him wordless for the remainder of his days. He hadn't needed words, though: his cracked and rheumy eyes had shone with pride every time they lit on Joe, and the boy could do no wrong by him.

George busied himself with supper for his brothers. In the little wooded area behind the cottage, he found good, clean earth with juicy roots in it. In the freezer, he had a jar of elephant-dung sauce, spiced with the wrung-out sweat of the big top acrobats' leotards, which, even after reheating, still carried the tang of vitality. Preparing a good meal for his kind meant a balance of earthy things and living things, things to keep the hands supple and things to make them strong, and so he brought in a chicken from the brothers' henhouse and covered it in the sloppy green-brown sauce, feathers and all. Bill, being the clever one, woke when the smell of the sauce bubbling in the microwave reached him, and he wandered into the kitchen.

To an untutored eye, Bill and George were indistinguishable. Both of them big, even for their kind — for their father had been an especially big specimen himself — whose faces were as expressive as sculptor's clay, whose chisel-shaped teeth were white and hard as rocks. When they were alone together, they went without clothing, as was the custom of their kind, and their bodies bulged with baggy, loose muscle. They needed no clothing, for they lacked the shame of the soft ones, the small thumb between the legs. They had a more civilised way of reproducing.

"Joe hasn't returned yet?" Bill asked his strong brother.

"Not yet," George told his clever brother.

"We eat, then. No sense in waiting for him. He knows the supper hour," Bill said, and since he was the clever one, they ate.

Joe returned as the sun was rising, and burrowed in between his brothers on their nest of blankets. George flung one leg over his smallest brother, and smelled the liquor on his breath in his sleep, and his dreams were tainted with the stink of rotting grapes.

George was the first one awake, preparing the morning meal. A maggoty side of beef, ripe with the vitality of its parasites, and gravel. Joe came for breakfast before Bill, as was his custom. Bill needed the sleep, to rest his cleverness.

"God-damn, I am hungry!," Joe said loudly, without regard for his sleeping brother.

"You missed dinner," George said.

"I had more important things to do," Joe said. "I was out with an Imagineer!"

George stared hard at him. "What did the Imagineer want? Is there trouble?"

Joe gave a deprecating laugh. "Why do you always think there's trouble? The guy wanted to chat with me — he likes me, wants to get to know me. His name is Woodrow, he's in charge of a whole operations division, and he was interested in what I thought of some of his plans." He stopped and waited for George to be impressed.

George knew what the pause was for. "That's very good. You must be doing a good job for your Lead to mention you to him."

"That little prick? He hates my guts. Woodrow's building a special operations unit out of lateral thinkers — he wants new blood, creativity. He says I have a unique perspective."

"Did you talk to Orville?" Orville was the soft one who'd brought them from their father's shack to the Island, and he was their mentor and advocate inside its Byzantine politics. Bill had confided to George that he suspected Orville was of a different species from the soft ones — he certainly seemed to know more about George's kind than a soft one had any business knowing.

Joe tore a hunk from the carcass on the rickety kitchen table and stuffed it into his mouth. Around it, he mumbled something that might have been yes and might have been no. It was Joe's favorite stratagem, and it was responsible for the round belly that bulged out beneath his skinny chest.

Joe tore away more than half of the meat and made for the door. "Woodrow wants to meet with me again this morning. Don't wait up for me tonight!" He left the cottage and set off toward the tram-stop.

Bill rolled over on his bedding and said, "I don't like this at all."

George kept quiet. Bill's voice surprised him, but it shouldn't have. Bill was clever enough to lie still and feign sleep so that he could overhear Joe's conversations, where George would have just sat up and started talking.

"Orville should know about this, but I can't tell if it would make him angry. If it made him angry and he punished Joe, it would be our fault for telling him."

"Then we won't tell him," George said.

Bill held up his hand. "But if we don't tell him and he finds out on his own, he may be angry with us."

"Then we should tell him," George said.

"But Joe and this Woodrow may not get along after all, and if that happens, the whole thing will end on its own."

"Then we won't tell him," George said.

"But if they do get along, then they may do something that would make Orville angry," Bill looked expectantly at George.

"Then we should tell him?" George said, uncertainly.

"I don't know," Bill said. "I haven't decided."

George knew that this meant that Bill would have to think on it, and so he left him. He had to catch the tram to make it to his shift, anyway.

The soft one with the six-to-noon shift left as soon as George arrived, without a word. George was used to soft ones not having anything to say to him, and preferred it that way. He was better off than Bill — soft ones always wanted to talk to Bill, and he hated it, since they never had anything to say that Bill wanted to know. The weather needed no discussion, Bill said. And as for the complaints about the shift's Lead, well, one soft one was just about the same as any other, and Orville had told them that at the end of the day, they worked for him, not for any Lead.

Joe liked talking to the soft ones. Joe liked to talk, period. He told the soft ones lies about their childhood in the shack with their father, and told them about how his brothers tormented, and even talked about the weather. When he got back home, he told his brothers all over again, everything he'd told the soft ones.

George had memorised the SOP manual when they came to the Island, five years before. It clearly said that the floor of the booth would be disinfected every three hours, and the surfaces polished clean, and the pots and machines refilled. The soft one with the six-to-noon shift never did any of these things, which could get him disciplined by their Lead, but George didn't complain. He just wiped and disinfected and re-stocked when he arrived, even though he had to be extra careful with the water, so that he didn't wash any of himself away.

Boys ran up and down the midway, baking in the mid-day sun. They reminded George of the boys he'd gone to school with, after the social worker had come to his father's shack. They'd teased him to begin with, but he'd just stood with his hands at his sides until they stopped. Every time he started a new grade, or a new kid came to the school, it was the same: they'd tease him, or hit him, or throw things at him, and he'd stand strong and silent until they stopped, even if it took months. His teachers quickly learned that calling on him in class meant standing in awkward silence, while he sat stoic and waited for them to call on someone else. The social worker could make him go to school with the soft ones, but she couldn't make him act like one.

George watched the boys carefully, as carefully as he had when he stood silently in the schoolyard, not seeming to watch anything. He was better at spotting a donkey than any of the soft ones. When a boy was ready to turn, George could almost see the shape of the donkey superimposed on the boy, and he radioed a keeper to pick up the donkey come morning. He got a bonus for each one he spotted, and according to Bill, it had accumulated to a sizable nest-egg.

George looked at the inventory and decided that the fudge was getting a little long in the tooth. He'd start pushing fudge-nut dips, and by the end of his shift, the tub would be empty and he'd be able to give it a thorough cleaning and a refill from fresh stock. "Hey guys!" he called to three boys. "Is anybody hungry?" He dipped a floss and held it up, so that it oozed fudge down his wrist. The boys shyly approached his booth. George knew from their manner that they were new to the Island: probably just picked up from a video-arcade or lasertag tent on the mainland that afternoon. They didn't know what to make of their surroundings, that was clear.

"Step right up," he said, "I don't bite!" He smiled a smile he'd practiced in the mirror, one that shaped his soft, flexible features into a good-natured expression of idiotic fun. Cautiously, the boys came forward. They were the target age, eleven-to-fourteen, and they'd already accumulated some merch, baseball hats and fanny packs made from neoprene in tropical-fish colours, emblazoned with the Island's logomarks and character trademarks. They had the beginnings of dark circles under their eyes, and they dragged a little with low blood-sugar. George dipped two more and distributed them around. The eldest, a towheaded kid near the upper age range, said, "Mister, we haven't got any money — what do these cost?"

George laughed like a freight train. "It's all free, sonny, free as air! Courtesy of the Management, as a reward for very special customers like you." This was scripted, but the trick was to sell the line like it was fresh.

The boys took the cones from him timidly, but ate ravenously. George gave them some logoed serviettes to wipe up with and ground the fudge into his wrists and forearms with one of his own. He looked at his watch and consulted the laminated timetable taped to the counter. 1300h, which meant that the bulk of the Guests would be migrating towards Actionland and the dinosaur rides, and it was time to push the slightly down-at-the-heels FreakZone, to balance the crowds. "You boys like rollercoasters?" he said.

The youngest — they were similar enough in appearance and distant enough in ages to be brothers — spoke up. "Yeah!" The middle elbowed him, and the youngest flipped the middle the bird.

"Well, if you follow the midway around this curve to the right, and go through the big clown-mouth, you'll be in the FreakZone. We've got a fifteen-storey coaster called The Obliterator that loops fifty times in five minutes — running over ninety-five miles per hour! If you hurry, you can beat the line!" He looked the youngest in the eye at the start of the speech, then switched to the middle when he talked about the line.

The youngest started vibrating with excitement, and the middle looked pensive, and then to the eldest said, "Sounds good, huh, Tom?"

The eldest said, "We haven't even found out where we're sleeping yet — maybe we can do the ride afterwards."

George winked at the youngest, then said, "Don't worry about it, kids. I'll get that sorted out for you right now." He picked up the white house phone and asked the operator to connect him with Guest Services. "Hi there! This is George on the midway! I need reservations for three young men for tonight — a suite, I think, with in-room Nintendo and a big-screen TV. They look like they'd enjoy the Sportaseum. OK, I'll hold," he covered the mouthpiece and said to the boys, "You'll love the Sportaseum — the chairs are shaped like giant catcher's mitts, and the beds are giant Air Jordans, and the suite comes with a regulation half-court. What name should I put the reservation under?"

The eldest said, "Tom Mitchell."

George made the reservation. "You're all set," he said. "The monorails run right into the hotel lobby, every ten minutes. Anyone with a name tag can show you to the nearest stop. Here's a tip — try the football panzerotto: it's a fried pizza turnover as big as a football, with beef-jerky laces. It's my favorite!"

"I want a football!" the youngest said.

"We'll have it for dinner," the eldest said, looking off at the skyline of coaster-skeletons in the distance. "Let's go on some rides first."

George beamed his idiot's grin at them as they left, then his face went slack and he went back to wiping down the surfaces. A moment later, a hand reached across the counter and plucked the cloth from his grip. He looked up, startled, into Joe's grinning face. Unlike his brothers', Joe's face was all sharp angles and small teeth. Nobody knew what a child of a tongue was supposed to look like, but George had always suspected that Joe wasn't right, even for a third son.

"Big guy!" Joe shouted. "Workin' hard?"

George said, "Yes." He stood, patiently, waiting for Joe to give him the cloth back.

Joe held it over his head like a standard, dancing back out of reach, even though George hadn't made a grab for it. George waited. Joe walked back to his counter and gave it back.

"We're dozing the FreakZone," Joe said, in a conspiratorial whisper. He put a spin on We're, making sure that George knew he was including himself with the Island's management.

"Really," George said, neutrally.

"Yeah! We're gonna flatten that sucker, start fresh, and build us a new theme land. I'm a Strategic Project Consultant! By the time it's over, I'll be an Imagineer!"

George knew that the lands on Pleasure Island were flattened and rebuilt on a regular basis, as management worked to stay ahead of the lightspeed boredom-threshold of the mainland. Still, he said, "Well, Joe, that's marvelous. I'm sure you'll do a fabulous job."

Joe sneered at him. "Oh, I know I will. We all do just fabulous jobs, brother. Just some of us have fabulous jobs to do."

George refused to rise to the bait. He could always outwait Joe.

Joe said, "We're thinking of giving it a monster theme — monsters are testing very high with eleven-to-fourteens this year. Dragons, ogres, cyborgs, you know. We may even do a walk-through — there hasn't been one of those here since the sixties!"

George didn't know what Joe wanted him to say. He said, "That sounds very nice."

Joe gave him a pitying look, and then his chest started ringing. He extracted a slim phone from his shirt-pocket and turned away. A moment later, he turned back. "Gotta go!" he said. "Meeting with Woodrow and Orville, down at Ops!"

Alarm-bells went off in George's head. "Shouldn't Bill go along if you're meeting with Orville?"

Joe sneered at him, then took off at a fast clip down the midway. George watched him until he disappeared through one of the access doors.

Bill was clearly upset about it. George couldn't help but feel responsible. He should have called Bill as soon as Joe told him he was meeting with Orville, but he'd waited until he got home.

He'd been home for hours, and Joe still wasn't back. Bill picked absently at the dinner he'd made and fretted.

"He didn't say how Orville found out?" Bill asked.

George shook his head mutely.

"Why didn't he invite me?" Bill asked. "I always handle negotiations for us."

George couldn't eat. The more Bill fretted, the more he couldn't eat. It was long dark outside, hours and hours after Joe should've been home. Bill fretted, George stared out the window, and Joe didn't come home.

Then, an electric cart's headlights swept up the trail to their cabin. The lights dazzled George, so he couldn't see who was driving. Bill joined him at the window and squinted. "It's Joe and Orville!" he said. George squinted too, but couldn't make anything out. He took Bill's word for it and joined him outside.

It was indeed Orville and Joe. Orville was driving, and Joe was lolling drunkenly beside him. Orville shook hands with Bill and nodded to George, who lifted Joe out of the cart and carried him inside.

When he got back, Orville and Bill were staring calmly into each other's eyes, each waiting for the other to say something. Orville was dressed in his working clothes: a natty white suit with a sport-shirt underneath. His bald head gleamed in the moonlight. His fleshy, unreadable face was ruddy in the glow from the cabin's door. George bit his tongue to keep from speaking.

"He's drunk," Orville said, at last. Orville didn't beat around the bush.

"I can see that," Bill said. "Did you get him drunk?"

"Yes, I did. We were celebrating."

Bill's eyes narrowed. "So you know."

Orville smiled. "Of course I know. I set it up. I thought you'd approve: Joe clearly needed something to keep him out of trouble."

Bill said, "This will keep him out of trouble?"

Orville leaned against the cart's bumper, pulled out a pipe, stuffed it and lit it. He puffed at it, and watched the smoke wisp away in the swamp breezes. "I think that Joe's going to really like life with the Imagineers. They're Management's precious darlings who can do no wrong. Anything they ask for, they get. There won't be any more discipline problems."

Bill said, "Why not?"

Orville grinned without showing his teeth. "Where there's no discipline, there're no discipline problems. He can work whatever hours he wants. He'll have access to anything he needs: budget, staff, an office, whatever. It's his dream job."

Bill said, "I don't like this."

George wondered why not. It sounded pretty good to him.

Orville puffed at his pipe. "Like it or not, I think you'll have a hard time convincing Joe not to do it. He's sold."

Bill went back into the cabin and closed the door.

"He took that well, don't you think?" Orville asked.

George said, "I suppose so."

Orville said, "Is everything working out all right for you? Shifts OK? Co-workers?"

George said, "Everything's fine. Thank you."

Orville tapped his pipe out on the bumper, then got back into the cart. "All right then. Good night, George."

George started cooking dinner for two. More and more, Joe spent the night in a suite at one of the hotels, "working late." George didn't know what sort of work he was doing, but he sure seemed to enjoy it. He hardly came back to the cabin at all. The first time he'd stayed out all night, Bill had gone back to the Island and gotten Orville out of bed to help him search. After that, Joe started sending out a runner, usually some poor Ops trainee, to tell them he wasn't coming back for dinner. Eventually, he stopped bothering, and Bill stopped worrying.

One night, a month after Orville had come out to the cabin, George slathered a muskrat's carcass with mayonnaise and lemon and dragonfly eggs and set it out for him and Joe.

Bill hardly ate, which was usually a signal that he was thinking. George left him half of the dinner and waited for him to speak. Bill picked his way through the rest, then pushed his plate away. George cleared it and brought them both mason jars full of muddy water from the swamp out back. Bill took his jar out front of the cabin and leaned against the wall and stared out into the night, sipping. George joined him.

"We're getting old," Bill said, at last.

"Every night, the inside of my uniform is black," George said.

"Mine, too. We're getting very old. I think that you're at least thirty, and I'm pretty sure that I'm twenty-five. That's old. Our father told me that he thought he was fifty, the year he died. And he was very old for one of us."

George thought of their father on his deathbed, eating the food they chewed for him, eyes nearly blind, skin crazed with cracks. "He was very old," George said.

Bill held his two whole hands up against the stars. "When father was my age, he had two sons. Can you remember how proud he was of us?"

How proud he was of himself? He'd done well enough that he could lose both his thumbs, and still know that his sons would take care of him."

George shifted and sighed. He'd been thinking about sons, too.

"I've wanted a son since we came to the Island," Bill said. "I never did anything about it because I couldn't take care of Joe and a son." Bill turned to look at George. "I think Joe's finally taking care of himself."

George didn't know what to say. If Bill had a son, then he couldn't. They couldn't both stop working to raise their sons. But Bill always made the decisions for them. George didn't know what to say, so he said nothing.

"I'm going to have a son," Bill said.

Bill did it the next night. He told Orville that he'd need a month off, and after eating the dinner George made for them, he made a nest of earth and blankets on the floor of their cabin.

George sat in the corner and watched Bill as he stared at his thumbs. It was the most important decision one of their kind ever made: a clever son of the left hand, or a strong son of the right. George knew that his son would come from the left hand. In the world his father had put them into, cleverness was far more important than strength. After all, Bill was having the first son.

Bill put his clever left thumb in his mouth and slowly, slowly, bit down. George felt muddy tears pricking at his eyes. Bill's hand coursed with silty blood. He ignored it, and used his strong right hand to take the severed thumb from his mouth and bed it down with infinite care in the nest he'd built.

George cautiously moved forward to peer at the thumb, which was already moving blindly in its nest, twisting like a grub. Bill looked on, his eyes shining.

"It's perfect," George breathed.

George felt an uncharacteristic welling up inside him, and he put his arm around Bill's shoulders. Bill leaned into him, and said, "Thank you, George. This family wouldn't exist without you."

They both slept curled around the nest that night.

By morning, the thumb had sprouted tiny arm- and leg-buds, and it inched itself blindly around the nest. George marveled at it before going to work.

Joe stopped by his stand that day. His belly was bigger than ever, and his skin was cracking like their father's had. "Big guy!" he shouted,

vaulting the counter into George's stand. "Where's Bill today? He wasn't at his post."

George said, "Bill had a son last night. From his left hand."

Joe rolled his eyes, which had gone the murky yellow of swamp water. "Wonderful, right? Ugh. There are better ways to achieve immortality, bro. I'm designing a crawl-through for HorrorZone: you're an earthworm crawling underneath a graveyard. It's gonna be huge: maggots as big as horses, chasing the Guests through the tunnels; huge ghost hands grabbing at them. We're building a giant tombstone as the weenie, you'll be able to see it from anywhere on the Island. We'll build out over the midway for HorrorZone — it's the biggest rehab we've done since they brought in electric power."

As usual, George didn't know what to say to Joe. "That sounds very nice," he said.

Joe rolled his eyes again and started to say something, but stopped when three Guests came up to George's booth. George hardly recognised the Mitchell brothers. The youngest was already three-quarters donkey, so dangerously close that it was a miracle he hadn't been picked up already. He was hunched over, and his hands were fused into fists. His hair had grown down over his shoulders in a coarse mane, and his lips bulged around his elongated jaws.

The middle and eldest were well on their ways, too. The points of their ears poked out from under their hair, and they carried themselves painfully, forcing their legs and hips upright.

George flipped over his phone and punched 911, but left it out of sight below the counter. Loudly, he said, "Come on over, boys! You look like you could use one of George's triple-dips, the best on the midway!"

From the phone, he heard the security operator say, "Thank you, George, we'll be along in a moment." Surreptitiously, he racked the receiver and smiled at the boys.

"How are you enjoying your stay, boys?" he said.

"It'th aw-thome!" the youngest said around his clumsy teeth.

George handed him a cone piled high with floss, then started building two more for his brothers. Joe smirked at them. George hoped he wouldn't say anything before security got there.

The eldest said, "I don't think my brother's feeling too good. Is there a doctor here I can take him to?"

The youngest, face sticky with confection, kicked his brother. "I'm fine!" he said. "I wanna go on more rideth!"

His brother said, "We'll go on more rides after we see a doctor."

The youngest dropped to his knees and cried. "No!" he said, hammering his fists on the ground. "No no no no!" George watched in alarm as the boy went all the way over to donkey. His cries turned to brays, and his shorts split around his haunches and tail. His shirt went next, and George smoothly vaulted the counter and stood in front of the donkey, blocking him from passers-by. The other two made a run for it. George snagged the middle by his collar, but the boy tore free and took off down the midway. George looked about wildly for security, but they still hadn't arrived.

Then Joe tore past him, moving faster than George had ever seen him go. He caught the boys and stuffed one under each arm, kicking and squirming. He grinned ferociously as he pinned them beneath his knees at George's feet. He clamped his hands over their mouths. "Got 'em!" he said to George.

A security team emerged from the utilidor beside George's booth, wearing clown makeup and baggy pants. Two of them tranquilised the boys and the third fitted the donkey out with a halter and bit. The clown slapped the donkey's haunch appreciatively. "He's a healthy one."

The security team disappeared down the utilidor with the Mitchell brothers: two boys and a donkey. Joe smacked George on the back. "Did you see me catch them? Like greased lightning! Bounty, here I come!"

George didn't mind sharing his bounty with Joe, so he just smiled and nodded and went back around to his booth.

Bill named his son Tom. Names weren't very important to their people, but the soft ones' world demanded them. Within a week, Tom was eagerly toddling through their cabin, tasting everything, exploring everything. His eyes shone with curious brilliance. The clever son of a clever son.

George loved Bill's son. He loved to watch Tom as he gnawed at their bedding, as he dug at the floor in search of grubs. Tom was clearly delighted with his surroundings, and George basked in Tom's delight. Bill could barely restrain himself from picking Tom up and hugging him every moment. The only time he left George alone with Tom was a few precious moments after each evening's meal, when he would duck into the woods to find some new toy for Tom: a crippled chipmunk; a handful of pretty rocks; a discarded beer can. The son built bizarre towers out of them, then knocked them down in a fit of giggles. Tom ate all day long, and spoke a steady stream of adorable nonsense.

Bill hardly spoke to George. Their evening meals were given over to watching the son eat. George didn't mind. Talking to the Guests all day wore him out.

When Tom was two months old, Joe came by George's booth.

"Well, it's final. Tomorrow, we shut down the midway. Too old-fashioned — it's only stood this long because some of the older Imagineers had an emotional attachment to it. I told 'em: 'That's your demographic, not the target demographic.' So we're knocking it down. HorrorZone's gonna be huge." He skipped off before George could say anything. His ears were long and pointed. It wasn't the first time George noticed it, but now, he could see that Joe's hunched-over gait wasn't just because of his belly.

George built a dozen cones for the Guests, but his heart wasn't in it. Besides, most of the Guests already had their hands full of gummi spiders and snakes, from the Actionland Jungle Treats buffet. His thoughts were full of Joe, and he turned them over in his slow, cautious manner. Joe was turning into a donkey. He didn't think that one of their kind could turn into a donkey, but this was Pleasure Island. Indulging your vices was a dangerous pastime here. He should tell Bill, but there was no phone at the cabin. He couldn't send a runner for him, because this was family business. His shift wouldn't end for hours yet, and this was too important to wait.

Finally, he called his Lead. "I have to get offstage. I'm having a bad day."

Technically, this was allowed. Management didn't want anyone on-stage who wasn't 100 percent. But it was something that none of the brothers, not even Joe, had ever done. The Lead was surprised, but he sent over a soft one to relieve George.

Orville and Bill were sitting out front of the cabin, watching Tom, when George got back. He wrung his hands as he approached them, not sure of what to say, and whether he should talk in front of Orville at all. He held his left thumb in his right hand, and it comforted him, a little.

Bill and Orville were so engrossed in Tom's antics that they didn't even notice George until he cleared his throat. Orville raised his eyebrows and looked significantly at Bill.

"I just saw Joe," George said. "On the midway. His ears are pointed, and he's walking all hunched over. I give him a few days at the most before he's all the way gone." George held his breath, waiting for Bill's reaction.

"Too bad," Bill said. "It was inevitable, I suppose. A child of the tongue! What was father thinking?"

Orville smiled and puffed at his pipe. "Don't you worry about it, George. Joe's going to be much, much happier. Focussed. If you'd like, I can bring him out here to live. Little Tom could have pony rides."

Bill said, "I don't think that's such a good idea. Joe's too wild to play with a child."

Orville put a hand on his shoulder. "You'd be amazed at how docile he'll become."

Bill scooped up Tom, who was up to his waist now, and who liked to grab onto Bill's nose. "We'll see, then." He retreated into the cabin with his son.

Orville turned to George and said, "You've probably heard that we're taking down the midway tomorrow. The others are all being reassigned until the rehab is done, but I thought I'd see if I could get you a couple months off. You could stay here and play with Tom — it's not every day you get to be a new uncle."

Orville had always taken obvious pleasure in the transformation of boys into donkeys. It was the whole why of Pleasure Island, after all. Orville seemed especially pleased tonight, and George thought that he was as surprised about Bill as George was.

George, not knowing what to say to any of it, said nothing.

It didn't take long for George to start missing the midway. Stuck at the cabin with Bill and Tom, he sat against an outside wall and tried not to get in the way. He prepared meals in silence, taking a long time in the woods, gathering up choice morsels. Bill and Tom ate on the floor, away from the table. Bill chewed the tougher morsels first, and then put them in Tom's mouth with his crippled left hand. Most of the time, neither of them took any notice of George.

One day, he prepared a whole day's worth of meals and left them on the table, then walked to the utilidor at the other side of the woods. He boarded a tram and rode to the old midway entrance.

The midway was fenced in with tall plywood sheets, and construction crews bustled over the naked skeletons of the new HorrorZone. Heavy machinery groaned and crashed. Nothing but the distant silhouettes of Actionland's skyline were familiar. George tried to imagine working here for years to come. An overwhelming tiredness weighed him down.

He took the tram back to the cabin and stripped off his clothes. They were browner than ever. His arms felt weak and tired. He suddenly knew that he would never have a son of his own.

Bill and Tom were playing out front of the cabin. He sat in his usual spot against the wall and watched them. "Bill," he said, softly.

"Yes?" Bill said.

"When will I have a son of my own?" Bill always knew the answers.

Bill gathered Tom up to his chest unconsciously while he thought. "I suppose that once Tom is grown, you could take some time off and have a son of your own."

To his own surprise, George said, "I want to have a son now."

Bill said, "That's out of the question, George. We're too busy with Tom." On hearing Bill's annoyed tone, Tom leaned into him.

George said, "I'm not busy. I am old, though. If I don't have a son soon, I won't be able to care for it until it's old enough to care for me."

Bill said, "You're thinking like Father. We're living with the soft ones now. Orville will make sure that you and your son will be fine until he's grown."

George never won arguments with Bill. He went inside the cabin and set out dinner.

Orville visited the brothers the next morning. He chucked Tom under the chin and shook hands with Bill. Then he took George out into the woods for a walk.

"Your brother tells me you want a son of your own," he said.

George nodded, and stooped to put a small, mossy log in his basket.

"Bill doesn't want you to, huh?"

George didn't feel very comfortable discussing the family with Orville. That was Bill's job. After some thought, he said, "Not right now."

Orville said, "I can see that that makes you unhappy. No one should be unhappy here. I'll see what I can do. Come down to Ops tomorrow morning, we'll talk more."

When George got back to the cabin, Bill was lying on his back on the floor, laughing while Tom climbed all over him. Tom still babbled, but they were real words now, though nonsensical. With his constant talking, he reminded George of Joe, and that made him even sadder.

George had never been to Ops before, but he knew where it was, in a collection of low-slung prefab buildings hidden behind the topiary sculptures near MagicLand. He clutched his right thumb nervously as he

stood and waited in the reception area for Orville to come and get him. The secretary had taken his name and buzzed Orville, and now kept sneaking him horrified looks. George's family were the only of their kind to leave their homeland and join the soft ones, and here at Ops, there were any number of low-ranking babus who'd never heard tell of them.

Orville was all smiles and effusion as he breezed through the glass security-door and pounded George on the back. "George! I'm so glad you came down!"

He took George by the arm and led him away, stopping to wink at the secretary, who looked at him with a mixture of disgust and admiration.

Orville's office was buried in a twisting maze of door-lined, fluorescent-lit corridors, where busy soft ones talked on telephones and clattered on keyboards. He led George through his door, into an office as big as George's cabin.

Orville paced and talked. "Did I say I was glad you came? I'm glad you came. Now, let's talk about Bill. Bill's happy. He's got what he wants. A son. He doesn't have to take care of Joe. It's good for him."

He paused and looked at George. George nodded.

"OK. There's a problem, though. You want a son, too, only Bill won't allow it."

It didn't need any comment, so George kept quiet.

"My thinking is, Bill's so busy with Tom, he wouldn't really notice if you were there or not. You're an adult, you can take care of yourself. Do you see where I'm going with this?"

George assumed it was a rhetorical question.

"Right. What I'm thinking is, there's no reason that both of you shouldn't have your own son. This is Pleasure Island, after all. No one should be sad on Pleasure Island. You've worked hard and well for us for a long time here. We can take care of you."

George felt an uncomfortable sensation in his stomach, a knot of guilt like rising vomit.

"I thought about having another cabin built in the woods, but that's no good. I think that you and Bill need your own space. So let me bounce my current thought off you: we'll put you up in the new Monster's Arms, that's the hotel we're building for HorrorZone. It's way ahead of schedule, almost finished now. There's a penthouse suite that you can take for as long as you like. It's only temporary, just until you and Bill have had some time to raise up your sons. Then, we'll get the whole family together back at the cabin."

The guilt rose higher, choking George.

"Don't worry about eating, either. I've briefed the house chef on your tastes, and he'll send up three squares every day; everything a growing boy needs." He flashed a grin.

"And forget about Bill. I'll smooth things over with him. He'll see that it's for the best."

Finally, George had something to say. "What about Joe?"

Orville had been almost dancing as he spoke, enchanted with his own words. He pulled up short when George spoke. "What about him?"

"I want to live with him again," George said.

"He's gone, you know that." Orville pointed his fingers alongside his ears. "Hee-haw, hee-haw. The monthly ferry will take him to the mainland tomorrow."

"I don't care about that," George said. "I want him there."

Orville said, "I don't think that's such a good idea, George. You're going away to concentrate on you — Joe's a handful, even now. I don't want you distracted."

George said, "I want Joe."

Orville stared at him. George set his face into a blank mask. Finally, Orville said, "If that's what you want, that's what you'll get."

George didn't have anything to fetch from the cabin, and Orville thought it would be best if he spoke to Bill alone, so he sent George to the stables to get Joe.

The donkey stables were beyond Ops, at the very edge of the island, opposite the docks where the ferries brought new boys in. A different kind of boat docked there, large utility freighters that brought in everything the Island needed and took away braying, kicking herds of jackasses.

The donkeys shifted nervously in their stalls. George smelled horse-apples and hay, and heard fidgeting hooves and quiet, braying sobs. He wasn't clear on what happened to donkeys when they went back to the mainland, but he had an idea that it wasn't very pleasant. On the Island, donkeys were prizes, a sign that a boy's every wish had been gratified. What happened afterwards wasn't something that they were encouraged to think about.

He walked down the clean, wooden aisles, peering into the stalls, looking for Joe. Finally, in a dark stall in the very darkest corner of the stables, he found him. A large, pot-bellied jackass, who leapt up and brayed loudly at him when he clucked his tongue at it.

"Joe?" he asked softly.

The donkey brayed again and kicked at the stall's door. It was already splintered from many such kicks. George opened the catch and was nearly trampled beneath Joe's hooves as he ran out and away, braying loudly. George chased his brother. He didn't start very fast, but once he got going, inertia made him unstoppable.

He cornered Joe at the door that led out to the Island. The donkey was kicking at it, trying for escape. George locked his strong right arm around Joe's neck. "Stop it, Joe," he said. "I'm taking you out with me, but you have to stop it."

Joe's eyes rolled madly, and he struggled against George, kicking and biting. George waited in silence until the donkey tired, then used a bridle hanging on the wall to lead Joe out of the stables.

When Joe saw Orville waiting for them, he went wild again. George caught him by the hind leg and dragged him to the ground, while Orville danced back with a strange grace.

Orville grinned and said, "I guess he doesn't like me very much." He came forward and darted an affectionate pat on Joe's haunch.

Joe brayed loudly and George kept his own counsel. Orville led them down a utilidor and into an electric tram with an open car. George led Joe in and held onto his neck while Orville sped down the utilidor. He drove up a service ramp and out into HorrorZone, then to the doors of the newly completed Monster's Arms.

George and Joe lived in the Monster's Arms. Every morning, Orville paid them a visit and snuck looks at George's thumbs. They were intact.

George wanted to have a son, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. Orville's visits grew shorter, and Orville's manner grew more irritated. Still, George had no son.

One day, he waited until Joe was napping, and slipped out through the iron-maiden elevator, right down into the utilidor.

The tram driver recognised him and took him out to the cabin. The last mile of the utilidor was dusty and disused. George leaped off the tram and walked quickly to the cabin, his heart racing. It had been so long since he'd seen Bill and little Tom. He missed them terribly.

The little cabin was even smaller than George remembered it, and it looked sad, sagging and ramshackle. He hesitated at the door, then, feeling a stranger, knocked.

There was movement inside, but no voices, and the door stayed shut. George opened the door.

It was a disaster. The kitchen cupboards were smashed in, the little table knocked over and splintered, the bedding scattered and soiled. Deep shadows collected in the corners.

"Bill?" George called, softly. A shadow stirred, an indistinct figure within its depths.

"Bill, it's George. I missed you. I need to talk with you. I'm confused."

The shadow stirred again. George crept forward, peering, his old eyes night-dimmed.

Bill huddled in the corner, wracked and wasted. He stared up at George through eyes filmed with tears. He held up his hands. They had already begun to shape themselves into hooves, but George could still see that both his thumbs were gone. His ears were pointed and long.

"Oh, Bill," George said.

His brother let out a braying sob, and George saw he had no tongue.

Orville came looking for them the next morning.

"Where are the sons?" George asked him, while stroking the donkey's head in his lap.

Orville smiled a slightly abashed smile. "I'm keeping them safe. I didn't think that Bill was in any shape to take care of them."

George said, "I'll take care of them. Bring them here. Joe, too — he's in the room. I'll take care of them all."

Orville smiled his abashed smile again, then gave George an ironic salute. "Yes, sir," he said. He patted Bill's haunch and smiled to himself.

George didn't know how to respond to irony, so he held his brother more tightly. Eventually, Orville went away, and then came back a while after that. He drove an electric cart. In the front seat, three sons bounced — Tom, bright and curious; another, strong and big; a third, whose little pot belly jiggled as he talked and talked and talked. In a trailer, Joe kicked and fought against his bonds.

George let him out first, then took the sons to the porch. Joe and Bill stared at each other for a long moment, then Bill brayed out a long, donkeyish laugh.

Orville looked with proprietary satisfaction at the donkeys, then at the sons, then at George. He wagged a finger at George, as if to say, I'll be back for you, someday. Then he got into his tram and drove off.

George went back inside and made dinner for his family.

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