

# **A Tale of two Englands**

## **A Disney romance.**

### **Christmas reimagined**

#### **A note from the author.**

Those of you who have read, and hopefully enjoyed '**A Tale of two Englands**' will doubtless pick up on the fact that Bru and Olivia didn't get together, face to face anyway, until a couple of months into 1990. **Suspend disbelief.** With this short, flight of fancy, story, I wanted to immerse in what I see as the sense of anticipation not only of Christmas, a Disney Christmas at that, and to put my characters into the world I experienced when I first fell under the spell of Walt Disney World. My intention is to try to recreate a whisper of the anticipation I remember, the relative simplicity of the Disney parks at that time, before technology took a quantum leap, transforming, and continuing to transform the whole of the Orlando complex as I write. At WDW, the magic then was different, not better or worse, but certainly nothing like we experience now. I loved it in 1989, and every visit since has been a complete joy, our last trip two years back having been the best ever ... until the next one of course. Needless to say, now we are able to travel from the UK, I can't wait to get back to the most magical place on earth in 2022, Genie+ and all.

A major factor I wanted Bru and Olivia to anticipate in the story was the emergence of the awesome Universal Studios, which emerged in June of 1990. I also wanted to make mention of the 'still finding its feet' Disney MGM Studios, launched only in May 1989. Because the storyline is fanciful, please disregard timescales and treat the Christmas gathering as timeless. If you adore the whole ambience, magic and timeless philosophy of Disney, as I do, you'll understand. If you've yet to cross that threshold, try it, you'll be grateful you did. Feel free to put me right on dates, attractions and anything else that comes to mind by all means. My default will always be 'if you can dream it ...' Join Bru and Olivia in Frontierland.

#### **Christmas Eve. Tom Sawyer Island. Magic Kingdom Walt Disney World Florida**

'Hey Lou, all clear at the fort ... both levels, and the turrets?' Lou's vigorous nod in the fading light was backed up by a positive 'yep' which was good enough for Al, who'd just hurried back from checking his own section, consisting of Injin Joe's cave and the barrel-bridge area.

'You switched off the cow-hand in the stable?' asked Al, ticking boxes on his sheet.

Lou's 'yep' was even more emphatic than the first. 'Do you get used to being on your own here after sundown?' he asked tentatively 'up at the fort, I felt I wasn't alone. Even

imagined someone was whispering to me.’ He gave a nervous laugh, expecting Al to tell him to get a grip, but his fellow cast-member shrugged, narrowed his eyes, the expression on his face mellowing from amused to thoughtful in a heartbeat.

‘Strange you should say that’ he replied ‘Thought it was just me. I’ve been doing this shut-down for three years now, and every time is different, can’t explain exactly’ said Al with a sigh. ‘So, yeah, I understand, about the whispers. Some nights, not often, it’s stronger than others if you get my meaning. Like tonight, it feels as though the island’s alive, with voices anyway, like when you’re over there.’ He inclined his head in the direction of the brooding Haunted Mansion, glowing green and dark yellow above the far bank of the river.

‘Because it’s Christmas, I reckon’ he continued ‘the atmosphere cranks up a gear. Add that to all the magic bouncing around the Kingdom, it’s hardly surprising the imagination’s on overload.’

‘That’s a relief, thought I was losing it’ said Lou ‘I was determined to be a cast member the very first day I visited with my folks a few years back. It’s as if the characters in the park, the ones in the attractions, not the guests, come to life the more you get to know the place. They seem real, good buddies, like we’re all part of the same show.’

‘Wow ... you got it quicker than most’ said Al, smiling, nodding sagely and peering up to see the first stars appearing. ‘It’s true though, we *are* part of the show, so it’s no wonder the characters, the lands ... this’ he said holding out his arms ‘seems real to us ... deep down, it’s how we wish it to be. Never forget, that’s just how Walt dreamed it, and if it’s good enough for him ...’

‘Nice thought’ said Lou, glancing back at the fort, which now wore a crimson halo of sunset. ‘Even so, it was a touch spooky’ he added ‘not scary, just a bit ...restless? I’ll be glad to get home, being Christmas an’ all.’

‘Been a magical day, and a long one’ muttered Al, both of them peering through the gloom towards the bright lights of Frontier Land as they snaked along the tree tunnel towards the raft-dock, a sudden breeze shaking the dense undergrowth to either side, the creak of a branch sounding just like a door being slowly closed.

‘Quick look over the mill and then we’re away’ he added, the two of them, now by torchlight, checking that Harper’s Mill was all clear before meandering the last few yards to the dock.

‘Now, listen up’ said Al gravely ‘are you ready for this? six paintbrushes’ he said without waiting for an answer, pointing to a basket at his feet. ‘The most important job in the morning, okay? Extra special day, so an early start.’

‘Brilliant ... first time for me, thanks Al’ smiled Lou ‘I’ll hide ’em up good for folks to find. I know some secret places.’

‘Great job, but not too secret, and merry Christmas’ said Al, shaking Lou’s hand warmly ‘now, let’s head for the mainland before it gets dark.’

‘Merry Christmas Al’ echoed Lou, as they slid through the water on the last raft of the day into a river of reflected light from the mainland, docking a few minutes later at the foot of Big Thunder Mountain, quietness of the island fading as the hubbub of ‘the wildest ride’

broke the spell. Tom Sawyer Island was, once again, sleeping after a busy day, the cabin fire extinguished, the cow-hand no longer snoring in the stable at the fort. All was peaceful, the island deserted, left for creatures of the night to explore, while imagination slumbered.

'It's getting dark, I think we'd best head back' whispered Olivia, snuggling into Bru's chest 'strange how the escape tunnel seemed to be nothing of the sort ... escape I mean?' Bru laughed.

Fort Sam Clemens on Tom Sawyer Island was one of those special places both Bru and Olivia had identified, even before they met, as one that was saturated with the very spirit of Disney, having origins in Walt's childhood, and certainly way before he'd even considered opening first Disneyland and later Disneyworld. Somehow both Bru and Olivia were drawn to such places, almost by default, finding affinity with the essence of the magic they not only considered very real, but that played a vital part in every aspect of their lives ... especially now they were together.

'Don't they shut up shop here at dusk?' replied Bru, kissing her again, at the same time wondering how he'd managed to remain in the constricted space of the tunnel for so long without freaking out, dark spaces still giving him issues from time to time. But ever since he'd found Olivia, all the old phobias had started to melt away, the power of love both healing and exhilarating.

'Surely they come around to check the island is clear?' he asked 'better get down to the dock just in case.'

'Hang on, the cow-hand's stopped snoring' said Olivia, stopping as they passed the entrance to the fort 'and is it just me, or aren't there usually more lights up here?'

'Well, the sun's going down, so it will feel a bit darker' replied Bru 'don't tell me we've missed the boat, or rather the last raft' he laughed 'we'll have to spend the night here. Didn't spot a hotel.'

'What ... you mean we're stranded, nothing to eat, nowhere to sleep?' asked Olivia, feeling remarkably relaxed. After all, she was with him, so everything was good.

'Gosh, on Christmas Eve too' said Bru, pulling up the collar of his leather jacket, linking arms with her and strolling through the fading light towards the river, now convinced that they'd been abandoned on a desert island, or the Disney equivalent. As they crossed the bridge, had they but glanced to the left over the water to the Haunted Mansion, they would have witnessed the green and amber lights slowly draining away, the mansion inexorably, and ominously, disappearing.

'Don't we have a table booked for dinner somewhere?' asked Bru, glancing at his watch 'darn, it's stopped' he said, for some reason shaking his arm 'now what?'

'No idea what the time is, but we should be able to attract someone's attention from the dock. It couldn't be more than six, so cast members should be about, and they can ...' Olivia's unfinished sentence coincided with their arrival at the water's edge.

Frontier Land, so familiar, and usually ablaze with lights in the trees and around the buildings, the imposing Big illuminated orange buttes of Thunder Mountain visible

throughout the park. Usually teeming with guests, especially now at Christmas, the hubbub of a thousand voices would be mingling with screams from roller-coaster.

Instead, where they *knew* the mountain to be, there was nothing but stygian blackness, a patchwork of stars being the only hint of light, a pale, ghostly moon contributing little. They heard no screams, no excited chatter, no music. Apart from the occasional rustling as a soft breeze played with the trees behind them, and a faint gurgle from the dark river, there was silence ... deafening silence.

Olivia held Bru's hand a little tighter, sensing neither fear nor concern, and not even questioning why that might be the case. Around them, in contrast to the mainland, that had, apparently, ceased to exist, lights still glowed dimly over the porch at Aunt Polly's Landing and the raft dock itself, luminosity having taken on a different hue, almost amber, less intense, lights merging together, flickering, floating, more spectral than real.

They'd both heard the low crackling sound at the same time, faint, like a radio tuner sweeping the air-waves to locate the correct frequency. Turning to each other, sensing rather than seeing the mutual, reassuring smile, they set off hand in hand towards the centre of the island. The fort, logically, was surely the most comfortable place to spend the night.

After barely three strides it was significant that, as they walked, two rows of lights magically appeared a few yards ahead and to either side, a backward glance showing that those on the dock were slowly fading, as if the warmth of their bodies was now the sole energy source. Or was there more to it than that?

To either side, through the thick jungle of bushes, they imagined they spotted the occasional pinprick of light, making them wonder if others were with them on the island.

'Cast members doing a final check?' said Olivia, both sure that wasn't the case but if not, what then?

Now they'd reached the bridge that linked the two islands, a faint light trail to either side extending a half-dozen strides ahead. The moment they stepped on to the bridge, another double line of lights started moving slowly towards them from the far side. Once again, with no sense of fear and only the slightest hesitation, they moved forward, the two processions destined to meet in the centre of the bridge. Each marker stopped when no more than ten feet apart, no features, other than the light-strings, discernible in the fast-fading daylight.

'Wondered where you'd got to.' A rich, low voice emerged from the darkness, instantly familiar ... yet chillingly impossible. But why on earth not? With what had happened in the last ten minutes, this was just another step, albeit a big step, more of a giant leap.

'Let's get on back to the fort. Chilly out here' the voice continued, a shadowy figure turning and heading off with purpose, humming softly, simply assuming they would follow. Bru and Olivia, tingling from head to toe, didn't think twice, setting off after the trail of

lights that stretched ahead of their companion, a solitary glance between them penetrating the gloom just enough to identify a mutual glint of excited eyes.

'Rarely get the chance to do this' said the deep voice ahead 'most don't *get it* you see. You both do, or you wouldn't be here now.' He chuckled softly.

Through the deepening gloom, the fort could only be identified by an orange glow flowing from the entrance, moose antlers glinting in the flames from what shortly manifested as a campfire bordered by a circle of fat logs, the flickering blaze casting shadows over the inner courtyard, the warmth and ambience of the fire comforting.

'So, how do you like my little island?' he asked as they sat to either side of the fire.

'Magical' replied Bru, by way of understatement, with no thought that the conversation was anything other than perfectly natural 'has it turned out as you wanted? There was a pause.

'Is it alright to call you Walt?' asked Olivia, her eyes shining 'I mean, who else could you be?' He chuckled again

'If that's how you see it, I'm not about to argue' he replied. 'And yes, in answer to the question, the island is virtually as I imagined it. Mother nature will have her way. It's the perfect playground, can't understand why more folks don't get over here. Mind you, the world's a different place to when Roy and I first had the idea, and time moves on. Less complicated in some ways, when I was a lad. Not necessarily better' he added 'I mean, technology is wonderful, if a little intrusive sometimes, but we have no choice ... we got to keep up. And I've always been keen to move on, to embrace change and innovation but, at the same time, it's important that these places, like this island I mean, don't get forgotten altogether. Need to preserve things, pay homage to our heritage, so we don't lose touch with our roots. You two are not going believe the changes coming in the next few years.'

'So, I guess the parks are due a shake-up?' asked Bru.

'And some' replied Walt with relish 'this Eisner guy has a bunch of ideas that'll turn things inside out. Maybe ruffle a few feathers but that's needed oftentimes if you want things done. Hell, Roy and I should know that.' Once again, the ready chuckle cut through the night air.

'I've read so much about how it all started' said Olivia 'can't imagine how you kept going when everything seemed to be working against you. I mean, getting the land, then draining the water, keeping all those people motivated.'

'Just that one thing ... imagination' replied Walt 'plenty of other words spring to mind, but imagination is and always will be the key. If it's strong enough, nothing can stop you. You know that perfectly well young lady. I could tell when you two' he glanced one to the other 'got together, we'd see something special' he added with a louder laugh.

'Do you know what Eisner has in mind then?' asked Bru 'and what do you reckon?'

'The Studios are a great idea' replied Walt 'had to hurry it a bit to get ahead of those rascals up at Universal, so it's a bit raggedy there at the moment. Give it time. I gather you enjoyed your visit?'

‘Are you everywhere then?’ asked Olivia, uneasy and excited at the same time, picturing Walt beside them as they kissed for the first time at MGM.

‘Well, yes ... and no’ hedged Walt ‘guys like you, who are on the same frequency as us tend to attract our attention, a bit like a huge magnet. Then we can get to share the magic like this, even if we can’t be physically with you on attractions, in the restaurants and suchlike.’ A hint of sadness had crept in.

‘When you say *guys like us*’ asked Bru, an image of the ballroom scene at the Haunted Mansion coming to mind ‘how do you decide who can join?’

‘It’s quite a big group, but very exclusive’ was the reply ‘and I don’t think you need me to answer your question’ he added playfully, with a shake of his head before continuing

‘I so wanted to see the project through, but my time was up. I hadn’t dreamt ever being able to enjoy the fruits of our imagination, don’t want to call it labour really. It was a battle, but heavy on the fun side. Roy hung around just long enough to see it through. Boy did he have to fight. That opening day, ten-thousand guests, and could easily have been more. I’ll never forget it, and then we found a million dollars of unpaid bills a while later.’ His laugh was infectious.

‘When Roy joined me, just a few months after the kingdom opened, he really gave me a hard time, but I could see he was pleased. He was the brains you see. I remember some guy asked me, before the Florida project kicked off, what would happen if I was hit by a truck. What was it I said? Something like ... ’

*‘Absolutely nothing. My brother Roy runs this company. I just piddle around.’*

‘Yes, I remember reading about this’ cried Olivia ‘Roy said that you did the dreaming and he did the building.’

‘That was about the size of it’ replied Walt, the glow from his cigarette bright as he inhaled deeply. ‘I can still do this by the way, smoke I mean. Can’t do me any more harm than it has already.’

‘So, on balance, are you pleased with how your dreams have fallen into place?’ asked Bru ‘I mean, it must be a bit frustrating.’ There was a pause as he looked around as if in anticipation.

‘You mean, do I wish I could have been more ‘hands-on’?’ replied Walt thoughtfully. ‘Maybe, but mostly they’ve done a pretty good job. Epcot was a bit of a shock at first, and nothing like I had in mind. I wanted folks to live and work there, but I can see why it shook out the way it did.’ He stood as he spoke, looking around, sniffing the air, finally letting out a deep sigh.

‘They’re starting early’ muttered Walt, easing himself upright ‘sorry, but it’s time for me to beat it. Perhaps we can catch up later. No need to be alarmed. Make yourselves scarce if you feel more comfortable, but you may find it amusing if you’d care to stick around.’

‘First time for what?’ asked Olivia in alarm, noticing that the temperature had swiftly dropped, a cold wind whistling between the timbers of the fort, making the campfire flames gyrate wildly, a distant rumble of thunder suddenly emerging as a musical soundtrack, just like one of Bru’s shows.

'Not sure they're going to want me to hang around' chuckled Walt 'drove me crazy last time. I had a few sharp words with them. Lots of extra questions this time, considering what's around the corner. Best leave 'em to it. They'll be here in a while, so have fun' he added, looking over the firelight into the darkness outside the fort entrance.

'What do you mean by *they*' asked Bru and Olivia, naturally turning to follow his gaze. 'Who are you expecting?' asked Bru, spinning back to find that Walt was nowhere to be seen, surprise at his sudden departure swiftly overcome, their focus now drawn to the faint, distant sound of singing or chanting from somewhere outside the fort. Within seconds, they were at the entrance, a clammy coldness enveloping them once away from the fire, a long, deep rumble, like a minor earthquake, making the ground vibrate, both of them shivering in the cool breeze, enhancing the tremor beneath their feet.

Out of the gloom, four double trails of lights were easing towards them through the thick undergrowth, each from a different part of the island, seemingly destined to converge exactly where they were standing. Now the music became clearer, separate themes mingled together, the combination jarring. Bru winced.

'Isn't that the pirate's 'yo-ho' song from Adventureland?' cried Olivia 'what's that other one?'

'Haunted Mansion' said Bru 'pretty sure.'

'What, the 'grinning ghosts' thing?' asked Olivia

'No' replied Bru 'I think it's the waltz from the ballroom scene ... you know, when the ghosts are dancing.'

'Yes, I can make it out now' said Olivia 'what next?'

'Music do you mean?' asked Bru.

'No, do we wait here and see what happens?' asked Olivia

'Walt said we might like to hang around. He didn't seem too worried' replied Bru 'but I'm not so sure. Let's head back inside and keep an eye on things for a while.'

Now, the music grew louder and they could make out individual voices, still making little sense, until an unmistakable 'aarrgh' left them in no doubt that pirates were part of the invasion force. And yet, that didn't explain the ghost music. Strangely, it didn't even occur to Bru or Olivia that there was anything unusual about the unfolding drama.

The earthquake faded then stopped, the breeze dropping instantly, a deathly silence falling over the fort.

Ducking down behind a palisade to the rear of the fire area, one of the turrets to their right and the conveniently placed escape tunnel within dashing distance, they watched as the four light trails appeared at the entrance, a strange collection of shadowy figures then entering the courtyard, some features becoming clearer as they approached the fire. The upbeat 'yo-ho' from earlier seemed at odds with the grim expressions, making Bru think that hiding was probably wise, at least until it became clear who they were and, more to the point, what they were doing here. Now closer to the glow of the campfire, Bru and Olivia were able to identify at least some of the group, peeping through a gap in the timbers, hardly able to breathe let alone whisper for fear of being discovered.

The pirates were easy to make out, the most striking being the captain of the ship who harangued guests as they emerged from the water slide into the sea-battle on Pirates of the Caribbean, his long, dark hair and swarthy complexion unmistakable, the cutlass sheathed, a shard of light from a gold earring glinting in flames from the fire. They took a while to place the pirate who stood by the Captain's side warming his hands.

'Isn't it the guy with the banjo, beside the donkey, just before the auction scene in Pirates?' whispered Olivia, rather too boldly for Bru's liking.

'Not so loud' he hissed 'think it's a mandolin though. He must have left it behind. We'll check it out tomorrow.'

At least two other pirates hung back from the main group, one of whom they recognised from the final scene, when prisoners were trying to persuade the dog to bring them the keys, bulbous cheeks and lips puckered in a permanent state of whistling pretty much a give-away. His companion was swathed in shadow, and partially obscured by his companion, all that was visible being a shock of hair that draped down over one shoulder.

Two guys, one with a pick-axe, the other holding a shovel, were surely from Big Thunder but, as the train on the ride moved along at such a pace, they couldn't place where they'd seen them on the hectic journey.

'Not the guy in the bath-tub?' whispered Olivia 'who else do we see on Thunder?' Bru shrugged.

'Hope he bought a towel' he replied, Olivia's giggle frozen as the pirate Captain swung his head round sharply, fixing a stare in their direction for a few moments before returning to the conversation, an occasional wary glance and the hint of a sneer making them feel distinctly uneasy.

'Ah, about time' snarled pick-axe guy, all of them swinging round as a chill breeze heralded the arrival of two spectral forms, glowing green and easily recognisable from the final graveyard scenes in The Haunted Mansion. Bru and Olivia automatically pulled their coats closer round their necks, thinking they really should feel colder. Through the transparency of the ghosts, a glowing sphere now drifted towards the fire, revealing the face of Madame Leota herself. They fully expected her to break into her 'serpents and spiders, tail of rat' speech but instead, she hovered above the fire, her eyes seeming to drift towards the palisade, behind which Olivia was now trembling, more with excitement than fear.

'Good of Walt to leave the fire' intoned one of the ghosts.

'I see he didn't hang around' said his phantom friend 'not surprised. You were pretty tough on him last time' he added, turning to the Captain, who now stood up decisively.

'Pah' he spat 'Anyway, enough of this. Can't wait any longer. Tinkerbell may drop in, but you know what she's like, flitting here and there, and Big Al will be late ... naturally. I want to get back to my Caribbean ride – we're due an extra supply of cannonballs for Christmas guests. Didn't Walt mutter something about meeting a couple of friends? What did he mean by that, do you reckon?'



'This is a private meeting' said shovel guy indignantly 'you must have misheard him, and not for the first time.'

'Mebbe' said the Captain curtly 'we only ever had one other of the ... converted, shall we say ... sit in on one such session. Lou Mongello, I remember him well. He'd make a good pirate. Swarthy, bit too good looking for my liking.'

'Look what he's achieved' said one of the ghosts 'spreading the Disney gospel alright.'

'Gathering a tidy following, growing all the time' added his companion 'goes on to do something called a podcast. Sounds like it should be growing in the Land pavilion.' The ghosts let out a low stretch-room laugh.

'So, these *friends* could be true believers too' said the Captain 'that makes 'em a cut above in fact, one in a million so, where are they? He glanced towards the palisade then shook his head. 'Mebbe they haven't got the stomach for it. Anyway, enough about that' he stood decisively. 'Now, this Eisner guy? What do we think?'

'He's got big plans, but most of them at MGM and Epcot. We seem fairly safe here at the Kingdom' said mandolin guy. 'Splash Mountain's on course to open in a couple of years, no secret there. Bit of company for you guys' he added, the Thunder duo nodding none to enthusiastically.

'You'll just have to raise standards, show 'em who's boss' said the Captain. 'Who's at risk?'

'20,000 leagues' said a ghost 'past sell-by date. Keeps breaking down, queue is too slow.'

'Magic Journeys perhaps?' said his friend 'and Tomorrowland is always going to change. Mission to Mars is looking a bit dated. I heard something about an alien encounter. Anyone?' He scanned the faces of the others.

'Are we going to get our own ET?' cried the ghosts in unison.

'Don't start that' snarled the Captain 'ET's for those rascals up the road.' He motioned towards the north and they all knew to what he was referring.

'More on that later' he continued 'just so long as we keep our own ships in order, we'll be okay, but MGM and Epcot are in for a real shake-up. The teams there are having their own meetings, otherwise they'd have been here with us as always. Too much to go through. But they lack our experience. Some of us have been at this game for twenty years or more. Mebbe we should go over and lend a hand?'

'We've been upgraded along the way, their AA's be brand new' said mandolin man, strumming his instrument automatically, just as if it were in his hands.

'Most of my bits are exactly as they were' said the Captain proudly 'although my arms now move better. The original, genuine animatronic components are where the experience lies' he added sagely, the others searching for, but failing to locate an appropriate response.

'As holograms' whispered a ghost 'we're a much better colour than we used to be though.'

'Yes' replied his spectral colleague 'I was bright blue a few years back?'

'I was a horrible orange colour' said the other 'clashed badly with my complexion...'

'Enough' roared the Captain 'to business. Motion will go first I reckon, but what about Horizons?'

'Can't hang out much longer, what with the new millennium looming' mused Leota.

'Reckon they'll dump it' said the Captain. 'No point after 2000.'

Olivia gasped rather too loudly, eight heads focussing on the palisade simultaneously.

'If I could suggest it could well be our guests?' intoned Madame Leota.

'Best make sure' said the Captain signalling to the two pirates at the rear, who scuttled away into the shadows, the Thunder guys creeping menacingly towards the opening into the inner fort, a ghost hovering above, grinning, naturally. Bru took Olivia's hand, easing her to the entrance of the escape tunnel, shadows from the Thunder team falling across the walkway as they went inside.

In pitch darkness, they waited with baited breath, holding on to each other, more for comfort than warmth. Now the two figures had entered the tunnel, silhouetted in the entrance, making them turn and head deep inside, the clank of a shovel making them move all the faster. Suddenly, a lantern snapped on directly in front of them, its glare stark in the blackness, the light revealing the whistling pirate and his rather more sinister companion. Before them stood the skeleton who they usually encountered at the top of the waterslide, the empty eye-sockets seeming to glow, his rusty mane of hair falling down over bleached bone shoulders. They braced themselves for the 'dead men tell no tales' pronouncement, but the fixed grin carried an air of equivalent menace.

'I knew I'd heard him right' growled the Captain as the captives were led back to the fire, playing their part in the charade by sticking their hands up by way of submission. The pirates and miners had done a poor job concealing a selection of smiles, one even offering to help Olivia up a step back into the courtyard. She and Bru stood in front of the fire, hands still aloft, wondering, as were the characters, what would happen next.

'So, you're Walt's friends?' sneered the Captain 'in that case, why were you hiding? And take your arms down, you look as though you're on a roller-coaster.'

'Thanks' muttered Bru.

'You're welcome' said pickaxe guy, even bowing slightly 'and you're prettier than the last one who called in' he added to Olivia.

'Well, thank you' she replied with a slight inclination of her head, the miner's face turning a shade of orange 'you said Lou?'

'Yes, Mongello' said a ghost.

'Better look him up Bru' she said 'reckon we'll get on just fine.'

'What the heck's a podcast?' asked Bru. Olivia shook her head.

By now, the Captain was clearly impatient to get on.

'I know we usually focus on matters here in the kingdom' he said 'but, seeing as the major changes are ...'

'You must be very special' said the skeleton from the shadows, ignoring the captain and turning to Bru and Olivia 'only the favoured few make it to one of these meetings.'

‘They are indeed.’ The voice of Leota sounded rather like a distant echo. ‘Few truly understand the mysteries we share. But then, this place is sacred to us, and any who pass through see but a glimpse of what is and what will be, our way of life ... and death. Yet those who traverse the barrier, and truly believe, will find meaning which crosses over into their mortal life.’

The Captain rolled his eyes but said nothing, the faintest nod of his head confirming that he agreed, although he wasn’t about to admit it.

‘That’s all well and good, but nothing we discuss can live beyond this moment’ he said firmly.

‘Have no fear’ said Leota ‘as sad as it would cruelly seem, tonight will simply be a dream.’

‘That’s okay, we dream all the time’ cried Olivia ‘mostly about Disney, and usually together. We know things have to change. But, Horizons ... it’s our special place.’

‘And it will always be so’ said Leota slowly ‘because you dream together, Horizons will stay with you, forever. Everything has its due time, think of it not as a crime’ a series of groans rising into the night air, the ghostly rhymes lost on her fellow characters.

‘If you can dream it, you can do it’ whispered Olivia.

‘And that’s the most exciting part’ added Bru as they held hands, tears in their eyes, warmth from the fire drying them almost instantly.

As the conversation moved on, Bru and Olivia increasingly felt like part of an inner-circle.

‘The Animal Kingdom?’ boomed the Captain ‘what do we feel about that?’

‘That’s a few years away yet’ said pick-axe guy ‘my worry is what will happen to Discovery Island. That’s the closest we have to an animal place’ he added, thinking over his choice of phrase.

‘Mebbe hand it over to we pirates’ said the Captain flourishing his cutlass ‘the perfect treasure island.’

‘No one has confided what will be decided’ intoned Leota ‘I see Discovery Island abandoned for many years.’

‘Now Star Tours is open’ said Olivia ‘surely Disney will make the most of the Star Wars theme?’

‘Thirty years from now, a new land takes a bow’ said Leota, her voice suggesting a smile ‘Star Wars will fly after MGM’s bye-bye.’

‘MGM?’ cried Bru, over another series of groans ‘gone altogether? How can that happen? What else will bite the dust?’

‘Backlot no more, including Catastrophe Canyon, Monster Sound Show, Streets of America ... all gone’ said the Captain.

‘What about the forced perspective?’ asked Bru in disappointment.

‘Forced perspective is on virtually every building’ growled the Captain, a grin softening the delivery ‘wait ‘til you see what they do with Everest in a few years.’

‘Loads of new places to stay’ said mandolin man ‘Dixie-Landings, Yacht Club, beach Club, Swan and Dolphin and, of course, the Grand Floridian’s already open.’

‘God, the place is going to be flooded with guests’ said the Captain.

'That's the whole point surely' wailed one of the ghosts 'we've room for one more at the mansion' he added playfully.

'It'll have to be special to lure us away from the Poly' said Olivia gleefully 'but Dixie-Landings? That sound wonderful.'

'Give it a year' whispered mandolin man 'and you'll be able to stay there. Take a bayou room, you'll love it. Building 18 is good. Garden view. Tell 'em I said so.'

'You know what's triggered all this' said the Captain, swishing his cutlass through the night air, glints of light reflecting from the fire into the shadows. 'Those Universal Studio landlubbers kick off in a few months.'

'T'will not be the same, we'll have to up our game' intoned Leota solemnly.

'We've had a few strange visits recently' said the other ghost dramatically 'harmless enough, although word is that Kong is due anytime soon, so that'll shake things up a bit. He won't come to the mansion though. They'll have to go some to catch up with us. I mean, ET won't quite cut it, and then ...'

'Sightings?' said the Captain, jumping in 'just at the mansion?'

'Well, yes' replied the ghost 'but then, they've got their own ghosts up there, 'who you gonna call' and so on' he mimicked, moving to imaginary music, the performance greeted with little enthusiasm. 'Nothing in our fantasy league though.'

'I reckon they'll be snooping around MGM more than here, to get a few ideas perhaps' his spectral colleague cut in 'at least our studio opened with more than the other lot will have to offer ... at least that's what we've heard.'

'I'd love to get over to MGM more often' said mandolin man 'The Great Movie Ride, Monster Sound Show ... you ghosts must like that ... the Indiana Jones Stunt Spectacular ... wow ... and a virtual lunch at the Brown Derby.'

'The future offers more than imagination can explore' exclaimed Leota, nodding heads trying to equate her cryptic response with what they knew of the future at MGM Studios.

'Strange world inside that ball' whispered the skeleton 'she means all the Star Wars stuff, I reckon and what about that Tower of Terror ... got one or two ghosts there I think.' His colleague didn't have the heart to explain the twilight zone.

'Epcot will be turned inside out, Futureworld anyway' said the Captain 'I'll be sad to see Horizons disappear as well' he added turning to Bru and Olivia. 'What would you two most like to see?'

A grunting, growling, panting, thrashing sound in the undergrowth outside the fort made any response irrelevant. They all swung round to see Big Al lumbering through the fort entrance, singing a far from tuneful version of 'Blood on the saddle' blood on the ground'.

'Oh, come on Al' wailed the Captain 'give it a rest.'

'On autopilot' growled Al 'so, what's the big rush to meet up?'

'Rush? We've been here ages. Still, better late than never I suppose' added one of the miners.

'Not so sure about that' said his shovel buddy 'who needs a grumpy old bear' he added, moving away as Al swung round, bared his teeth and growled.

'You know we catch up once a year' said the Captain 'as senior animatronics at the elite Magic Kingdom, the flagship park, it's important to make sure we're ready.'

'For what?' asked Al scratching his head.

'Big changes coming, you know that' said mandolin guy 'in the parks, and with the ... other guys up the road.'

'You mean Univers ...' he started to say

'Noooo' they all shouted, including Bru and Olivia.

'Don't be so snippy' said Al sullenly 'we're good here at the Kingdom, no one's gonna touch us ... and ... who are you two?' he snarled, swinging round and fixing them with a stare. 'Can't quite place you. That damp old pirate ride? No, Diamond Horseshoe ... got to be. No, hang on, they use real people, just to dumb things down a bit. So, you're ...?'

'Guests of Walt' chimed in both ghosts, followed by a passable impression of the low laugh from the stretch room at the Mansion.

'What? Has he lost his mind?' thundered Al 'these secrets are for us, and us alone. No wonder he's not here. I gave him a roasting that last time when he let that other fella sit in. Lou something or other ... now he knows more about Disney than we do.' Al sat back, exhausted by his outburst, casting a wary eye around the courtyard, in case Walt was smoking a cigarette in the shadows somewhere.

'What we reveal tonight will fade at morning light' intoned Leota.

'Do we jot stuff down?' hissed Olivia, the idea squashed by a wave of admonishing looks.

'Anything you hear will simply disappear' added Leota, Olivia whispering an embarrassed 'sorry'.

'Anyway, crack a smile Al, it's Christmas tomorrow' said the Captain, impatiently 'Bru and Olivia are here courtesy of Walt himself, and that's good enough. Nothing we discuss goes beyond this island, okay?'

'If you say so' replied Alf 'you're both mighty privileged' he added graciously.

'Thanks Al' said Bru kindly 'and from one musician to another, Happy Christmas.'

'Another musician? That's all I need' cried Al, the hint of a smile disappearing as quickly as it had appeared 'and Christmas ... hell ... they won't even let me sing a Christmas song. Same old stuff all the time. I'm due an upgraded repertoire. And anyway, as I see it ...'

Al's rant was dramatically cut short by a bright beam of light that pierced the tree canopy, carving a steely pathway through the entrance to the fort and over the fire itself into the inner courtyard.

'Make yourselves scarce' hissed the Captain, Bru and Olivia scuttling up the steps into a turret.

All but the two ghosts leap back, a loud whooshing noise preceding a rush of wind, two trails of flame merging with the campfire, the arrival of what manifested as a car searing right through the ghosts before coming to a screeching halt, the relative silence replaced by a hissing sound, icy vapour rising from the car as one door swung upwards and a figure emerged. Al was the first to move, taking two strides towards the vehicle.

‘What are you looking at butthead?’ sneered the familiar voice of Biff Tannen ‘borrowed the DeLorean from that loser Doc Brown. Been over to your Studios, stirred ‘em up a little.’ He laughed. ‘It’s all mighty pretty, but no attitude. Thought it’d be fun to drop in and mess with you before I head back.’

‘Hope you got plenty of plutonium, you’re gonna need it’ roared the Captain, drawing his cutlass and moving swiftly past the ghosts, mandolin man getting in his way as he surged towards Biff.

‘Wait ‘til you see what we got lined up at Universal ... and we don’t need to be nice to people either’ he sneered.

‘You got nothing’ growled Al ‘ET in a basket and a bunch of sorry ghosts.’

‘We got plenty. This is just a preview’ hissed Biff dismissively ‘you should hear what Kong’s saying about this Animal Kingdom idea. Bet you don’t even have dinosaurs.’

‘The stars would tell us that we do. In less than eight years’ time they’re due’ boomed Leota, rather louder than usual. Biff stared at her for two seconds before throwing his head back, laughing extravagantly.

‘A rhyming goldfish bowl, that’s rich’ he sneered, leaping into the driver seat as the Captain closed in.

‘Time to get back to the future, and that ain’t here’ he yelled. ‘In a couple of years, you’re gonna see some serious ...’ the last word obliterated by clouds of hissing steam as the door closed, the DeLorean rose into the air, then turned and streaked across the campfire, through the entrance and away.

‘Eighty-eight miles per hour’ screamed Biff as a parting shot, a comet-like streak of light following the explosion as the fleeing DeLorean vanished, a brief silence broken only by a faint rustling as foliage settled after the intrusion.

‘Right, change of plans’ said the Captain decisively to his animatronic crew ‘that was to be expected I suppose.’ Everyone seemed relaxed about Biff’s appearance, Bru and Olivia coming down from the turret to be greeted by smiling faces with the exception of Al.

‘We’ve been up to their place, just to see what they’re doing, so it’s hardly surprising they paid us a visit’ said a ghost, his transparent colleague nodding in agreement.

‘As I said earlier, I think we’d best get over to the Studios’ continued the Captain ‘just to make sure all’s okay. We’ll finish the kingdom discussion later. Been fun meeting you’ he half-snarled to Bru and Olivia ‘wave to me when you next come down that water slide on the Caribbean. I still may not spare ye, t’all depends ... aharrh.’

‘Much as we would like to stay, we’ll meet again another day’ said Leota kindly, looking down at them from her sphere.

‘Lot of fuss and bother’ said Al ‘nothing can touch us here at the Kingdom. Say hi to Walt when you catch up with the rascal.’ He lumbered off, muttering under his breath, a bag of nuts and a cosy cave more to his liking. It occurred to Olivia that she wouldn’t be surprised to find him snoring inside Injin Joe’s cave when they left in the morning ... if they could leave that is.

‘Loads more to tell you’ added mandolin man ‘massive changes in the next few years. You wait until you see what they do to the Studio and the Animal Kingdom, wow, it’s going to be ...’

‘Come on’ shouted the other two pirates from the entrance, mandolin man smiling at them as he dashed off after the Captain and the miners, now well on the way to the bridge, Leota drifting regally along behind with a ghost to either side. Two ribbons of light marked the path of the procession towards the water, a hemisphere of orange and yellow rising into the night sky a few minutes later, accompanied by the deep boom of a big canon firing off a round, marking their departure for the studios, a vision of the pirate ship coming vividly to life.

Bru and Olivia stood by the entrance to the fort hand in hand, a bright moon creating a pattern of gently moving shadows, a ceiling of stars apparently untroubled by events of the evening.

The musician in Bru sensed a musical soundtrack, the rustle of leaves becoming a synthesiser, laying down a underpin, the soft breeze cutting in softly as high strings, much as he had tried to link songs together in the band. A choir took up the theme, one he knew but couldn’t put a name to, probably nudged by a thought that the candle-light processional at Epcot would either be happening now, or maybe later. Glancing at his watch, it was still not working. Time had, effectively, stood still. The music rose to a crescendo, an echo of Christmas night, a feeling of goodwill to all. He looked over at Olivia, who smiled and nodded.

‘Yes’ she whispered ‘I can hear it too. You made that happen. I love you so much Bru.’ They kissed gently, breaking apart in surprise as snowflakes drifted silently down from a clear, star-spangled sky, laying quickly on the dry ground, melting away where flakes brushed over their cheeks and hands.

‘Not sure I want to hear about the future’ said Bru gently, reaching down to kiss the top of her head, the smell of her skin and hair intoxicating.

‘I think we agree on that’ sighed Olivia ‘and the rumour mill is so busy, it’s impossible not to pick up snippets, so we’ll find out anyway. Thirty years from now though? ... anything could happen.’

‘True’ replied Bru ‘never get to think decades ahead, now’s more fun. All that Star Wars and Animal Kingdom stuff? And Dinosaurs? Wonder what that’s all about. Sounds more Universal to me. They’ll probably have real ones.’

‘There was talk of a film, Spielberg said something, a Michael Crichton book?’ said Olivia, chuckling ‘nothing would surprise me. We’re going to have to take a look at this new Universal park, aren’t we? If only for market research?’

‘You bet’ said Bru enthusiastically. ‘I’m darn sure Walt will love it, and it’s not as if we’re traitors is it? Disney will feel even more special and it’ll certainly make everybody up their game, just like Leota said. It’s already happening. Wonder what they’ll find at MGM.’

Without really thinking, they'd walked slowly away from the fort, leaving two sets of footprints in the snow, and now stood on the bridge between the islands, the rows of lights, like before, mapping their progress a few feet ahead. It was a little colder now, although the snow had stopped and Bru wrapped his arms around her as they gazed out across the unnatural blackness, just a slither of waxing crescent moon casting an apologetic veneer of light across the water, where they'd have expected to see the Haunted Mansion on the left and Thunder Mountain to the other side.

'Wonder if all the lights went out at the same time' said Olivia 'I didn't look on the mansion side when we went to the boat dock.'

'Too busy making sure we didn't trip over, I reckon' replied Bru 'but maybe we'd have noticed if they were there rather than if they weren't.'

'That's heavy man' said Olivia

'You're warming to Universal' said Bru with a chuckle 'Marty would be proud of you.'

Within the wide ceiling of stars there was a good deal of activity, sudden flashes of light to the north, and the occasional sound, like a distant whooshing noise they both automatically associated with the gliding of cars on the People Mover. A bright comet lit up the sky in the opposite direction, two laser beams tracing an object as it sped away, leaving a luminous smoke trail behind.

'Got to be the Studios' said Bru ruefully 'Biff still having some fun?'

'It's a bit like kids in the playground' said Olivia with a low laugh 'it's all bluster, 'my park's better than yours' and so on.'

'Wonder what Walt would think of it' muttered Bru as they turned and headed back towards the fort, the thought of a warm campfire very appealing. Still the night sky sparkled with activity, the occasional crackle, like the static electricity sound they'd heard earlier, seeming to pulsate through the air, their light trail eventually bringing them to the fort entrance, a vague humming sound vibrating through the cool air, forming a coherent tune as they drew nearer.

'A great big beautiful tomorrow?' said Bru, taking up the theme softly.

'Wondered where you'd got to' said a deep voice from the far side of the fire, cigarette smoke mingling with that from the fire, rising in coils into the stillness of the night. Walt regarded them sagely, weighing up what they may be thinking.

'Lot of activity on that first Christmas, so we're told' he drawled 'I always get a picture of a sky full of stars, a beam of moonlight playing on baby Jesus in the manger, couple of camels, a donkey and a posse of wise men' he added with a chuckle. 'Come and sit down and warm up.'

'Never did really follow through on the religion side' he continued as they joined him around the fire. 'Too much Church early on I reckon. Kinda put me off, but it doesn't mean to say I don't believe in God, one way or another. In fact, I believe even more now. All the



religions have a different way of looking at things, and that's how it should be. What do you think?' he asked.

'Tolerance is in short supply ... sadly' said Olivia 'I suppose that's what makes this place, Disneyworld I mean, special. It's a sort of leveller ... is that the right word?'

'We're all in this together' said Walt with a chuckle 'I always wanted this to be somewhere folks came to and left all their worries at the gate. 'Shame you two didn't get to see the procession at Epcot.'

Bru and Olivia looked at each other, a vague recollection sending shivers through both of them at the same time, although they couldn't pinpoint why that should be the case.

'Nothing to fret about' said Walt kindly 'Let's just say that there are thresholds we all have to break through, a sort of testing time, when life gets in the way of the getting together process. We know a bit about you two and appreciate you understand and respect what we're about here. Believe me whatever led to you meeting up here at Walt Disney World, bless my brother for calling it that, was truly meant to be, all part of the same magic we share with you.

'I think we knew each other even before we met' said Bru 'it was the magic that drew us together, and you're right, it's necessary to cross a threshold, probably more than one.'

'You're strong, I can tell' chuckled Walt 'and we'll have a wedding pavilion in a year or two ... if you wanted to take things a step further' he added, his eyes sparkling in flames from the fire. 'I guess those rascals told you a bit about what's coming up? You can see now why I made myself scarce. They'd have given me a roasting. That AI makes my head ache.'

'They were telling us stuff' said Bru 'but they got cut short by the ... well the guys from up the road' added Bru.

'Yeah, that's gonna be a mighty big show. All good fun' replied Walt 'Universal, you *can* say it, will never get the magic the way we understand magic, but they're pretty damn good at what they do. Plenty of room here in Florida, as I said when we acquired the land ... that was quite a process. Anyway, you'll hear about changes way before they happen. Do you want a snapshot?'

Bru and Olivia looked at each other. It wasn't as clear cut as that.

'I'm happy to let things unfold' whispered Olivia 'to be surprised.'

'Me too' added Bru 'but I gather we won't remember this tomorrow, so ... maybe, just a snippet or two?' Olivia nodded and they both sat forward, warming their hands, a tingle of anticipation surging through them.

'Okay' he said 'you've probably heard some of this, but there's a bunch of beautiful hotels, resorts they call them, Port Orleans, Dixie Landings, I really like the look of that' he added gleefully 'a Vacation Club which'll give folks the chance to come stay more often. Oh, and a Mexican style resort and big things happening around a boardwalk, like we have on the East coast, dance-hall, several hotels, Yacht and Beach Club amongst them. Then there's a few new resorts especially for families, All Star I think they mentioned.'

'Are the Poly and Contemporary staying the same?' asked Olivia.

'Oh yes' replied Walt firmly 'they're perfect as they are. I love the Contemporary, that's where I'd stay, although I see you folks like the Poly best? Then there's what will be the Wilderness Lodge, up there near River Country. Shame that's going to have to go, 'cause It's the perfect old-fashioned swimming hole. No one's come up with any plans just yet, nor for Discovery Island, that's gonna be retired.'

'Yes, the others told us' said Bru 'I suppose that depends on what happens at this Animal Kingdom we've heard a lot about?'

'Nail on head' replied Walt 'never fear, the island will just go back to how it was. Still looks pretty in the middle of Bay Lake. I hear the pirates have designs on it, but that's not gonna happen.'

'What about in the parks?' asked Olivia 'surely the Kingdom will stay much the same?'

'Biggest thing is next to Thunder Mountain' he said, taking a long pull on his cigarette and leaning forward, his eyes alight 'log-flume adventure with my old friend Brer Rabbit. Quite a story to be told there. The submarines are on the way out.'

'20,000 Leagues?' gasped Olivia 'yes, they mentioned that. it's a slow loader though isn't it?' she added.

'That's part of the reason' said Walt 'also it breaks down a lot. Dreamflight won't make the cut either.'

'Similar, in some ways, to Motion at Epcot' said Bru 'same atmosphere. Love them both.'

'Already looking dated' said Walt with a shake of his head 'things are moving so fast. Lots of technology ahead, you won't know the half of it. Those cut-outs on Motion and Dreamflight and, to an extent, in Horizons, will be old-hat very quickly. Motion will be transformed into some sort of Test facility, with new-fangled automobiles whizzing around.'

'So, is Horizons doomed?' asked Olivia 'had a feeling, what with the millennium coming up.'

'They did think to re-imagine it, the concept was so strong you see. But ... new century and so on.' He gazed up at the night sky, a myriad of stars peeking through the tree canopy. They followed his gaze, the relevance suddenly clear to Bru.

'It's going to be something to do with Space, isn't it?' he said, Walt's eyes meeting theirs across the fire.

'Yes, that really *is* the future' he replied slowly 'but you've got a few years to enjoy Horizons before Mission Space makes an entrance.' Bru and Olivia hugged in a mixture of relief and anticipation.

'You're a music man Bru' he said 'we got a coaster planned over at the Studios that'll tip you upside down.' He shuddered at the thought. 'Aerosmith. You'll know about them I suppose?'

'Wow ... Steve Tyler, what a guy' said Bru 'Joey Kramer, the drummer, was up at Berklee College near you' he added, turning to Olivia. 'Upside down or not, I can't miss that. Bet they'll use something from the 'Toys in the attic' album. Bit heavy for you Walt ... the music I mean?'

'Give me the Sherman Brothers any day' sighed Walt. 'You know, I wanted the Beatles to do a song in Jungle Book? Didn't work out but the vultures looked just like 'em' he chuckled.

'Beware the Tower at the Studios' he added, perfectly imitating the old hag voice famously used in the Snow-White movie. 'You're gonna see some hefty changes' he continued 'guest numbers will increase so much in the next few years, they're rethinking the queuing areas, making them more fun, part of the attraction. You wait 'til you see what's planned for the Land pavilion at Epcot.' Walt was enjoying himself.

'Fancy at flight on a hang-glider?' he said 'that'll be something else. Soarin' over California, or some such' he cried 'and even that rascal Winnie the Pooh gets an attraction all to himself. Toad's days are numbered though. Shame, I'll miss the little fella. Just hope they keep Peter Pan though.'

'Doesn't Beauty and the Beast get a look in?' asked Olivia 'maybe in Fantasy Land?'

'Spot on young lady' replied Walt 'watch out for something at the Studios, next year sometime. And you're right about Fantasy Land, big plans for Beauty there, give it ten to twelve years. Think how many times you'll be coming to see us over that time.'

'Then there's the fast-pass system. Easy at first but you should see it in thirty years. You'll need a genie ... you'll see what I mean' he said, standing up suddenly, a bright burst of light having caught his eye 'oho, looks like I'm needed over at Epcot.'

He turned to them, the warmth of his smile matched by shining eyes.

'It's been a joy spending time with you folks. Look after each other, enjoy the magic and thank you for making my Christmas. Come see me whenever you're here. I may be on Thunder or Splash, but you'll find me okay now we're in touch ... never forget though, I'll always be *here*.' He added, placing his hands over his heart.

'And remember, if you can dream it, you can do it. I did, and will continue to do so, behind the scenes you understand, but still at the helm, whether they like it or not. As long as there are enough of folks like you two, who believe that we can make the world a better place, all will be well. Take a look at this' he added, sweeping an arm towards the high palisade of the fort.

Instantly, an opaque wall of light, like a movie screen, appeared, the surface settling as a series of moving pictures came to life, attractions and resorts he'd mentioned appearing in full colour. Bru and Olivia were now at what was surely Dixie Landings, standing by the waterwheel, then on the bridge over the Sassagoula River with stately mansions to one side, rustic lodges to the other, before being drawn inside by the sound of music, a guy advertised as 'yehaa Bob' going through a brilliant routine on a moving piano, laughter all around them.

Next, drifting through heavy cloud above the Golden Gate Bridge, the hang-glider soared down over the rapids, the epic soundtrack mellowing as they reached a bend in the river, Zip-a-dee-doo-dah taking over as they plummeted down Chickapin Hill in a hollowed-out log on what had to be Splash Mountain, the raft becoming a prototype car as they hit the

bottom of the drop, whisking them at speed on a track outside what they quickly identified as the old Motion building, the car screeching to a halt and now static, 'Love in the elevator' reverberating through the night as Aerosmith blasted them from 0-57mph in less than three seconds.

Spinning out from the first spiral, the music faded abruptly, the car stopped and they were face to face with the outline of a creature, broken train tracks stark against a backdrop of snowy mountains. Gently, then ever faster, they glided backwards through dark caves, emerging into what appeared to be a mountain range, entering thick cloud as the car descended, the Beast's castle now in semi-darkness before them, sublime music beckoning them inside, the haunting theme drawing Bru and Olivia into a long kiss. Bru was familiar with the genius of Howard Ashman and Alan Menken, the music so Disney, so perfect, a singular style which Bru, as versatile as he was, knew he could never aspire to. The moment the song ended, the screen slowly faded with a soft crackling sound and they were left sitting quietly beside the embers of the fire, only then noticing that Walt had disappeared.

'Said he was off to Epcot. Wonder what that was all about?' asked Olivia 'I got the impression he wasn't too worried by those Universal characters.'

'Well, you know the style of films they make' said Bru 'always a bit edgy, so the characters will be the same I suppose. That's what makes movies so magical. Walt knows all about that.'

The fire had died away to a rich red glow, with no flames to throw shadows around the inside of the fort.

'I'll see if I can find some firewood' said Bru. 'If we have to stay 'til morning, it's going to get pretty chilly.'

'I'll come with you' replied Olivia, suddenly aware that the fort no longer seemed the cosy haven it had seemed earlier and, if anything, felt a little creepy. The moment they walked through the entrance, both of them froze. Row upon row of glistening lights flickered through the undergrowth, all seeming to link the fort to the raft dock, some straddling the trees and even the water between the islands, all culminating in a pale amber glow which pulsed steadily beyond their view.

'Either we're being invaded' said Bru, feeling more excited than anxious 'or we're supposed to head down to the dock.'

'I suppose we do have the choice' said Olivia slowly 'but *do* we really? I don't think so. Let's go.'

Unlike earlier, the gleaming trails didn't open up as they walked, although it did seem as though the pale lights glowed more brightly as they passed. Reaching the bridge without difficulty, the journey through the dark woods towards the mill and the boat dock was much more perilous than before, the pathway twisting and turning, each step in the semi-darkness a challenge. The raft dock was no more than thirty yards ahead now, and they could just make out the orange glow beyond the shelter, surely over the river itself.

A chill breeze suddenly gusted from nowhere, lights in the trees and on the footway flickered twice, as if in a thunderstorm, then went out completely, leaving the misty orange glow as the sole source of illumination.

'What's happening' gasped Olivia 'aware that an answer was unlikely. Something's changing Bru.'

'I think we're about to find out' he replied, clasping her hand and moving slightly in front as a flash of lightning lit up the raft shelter, identifying at least one figure, two or three others in shadow to either side, followed by another flash which showed the shelter empty, it's bare outline silhouetted against the orange glow.

'It's showtime' rang out a voice from behind, Olivia and Bru spinning round to be faced with the leering face of Betelgeuse, although not the one they remembered from the Beetlejuice film each of them had seen a couple of years before.

'Don't tell me' said Bru confidently, taking a step towards them, much to Olivia's surprise 'you're part of the crew up at Universal? Am I right?'

'Bang on the money dude' replied the pale character within the lurid black and white suit 'meet my friends' he added pointing to either side, Dracula and the Wolf Man now discernible, looking more impressive than frightening.

'I'm the ghost with the most, babe' cried Betelgeuse, seeing Olivia's anxious expression. 'Worry not pretty lady' he added with a look of approval 'Biff mentioned he'd had a tussle with some pirates here on the island, so we thought to look in and give 'em a hard time. Too late? Shame.'

'Yeah, you missed 'em. They went to the Studios a while back' said Bru calmly.

'Let's head over there then' said Dracula, turning to Bru and Olivia 'sounds like fun. Come up to our place in a few months if you want to see how a *real* show's put together.'

'Hey, how did you two get through the namby-pamby Disney security?' asked Betelgeuse softly 'you must be pretty special' he added, leering at Olivia 'anyway, really must dash ...we gotta do the monster mash ... you'll see what I mean when you visit. Time to turn on the juice and see what breaks loose.'

With nothing more than the whoosh of a single rocket taking off, followed by a long, gently fading luminescent trail, they were gone, lights beneath the boat dock canopy instantly growing in strength, the river suddenly visible, glowing amber and gold. And yet, of Big Thunder and the rest of Frontierland there was still no sign, not one solitary speck of light to the far side of the water.

'Christmas Eve was always the best time when I was a kid' said Bru softly, his arm around Olivia's shoulder 'the day itself was okay, loads of relatives hanging around, too much to eat and so on, but the night before Christmas was magical.'

'Me too' she said, snuggling into him 'not just because we were looking out for Santa, but there was something other-worldly in the air, a bit like now. It was a combination of the past, thinking now nice it would be if we were all in this together, and looking forward to a better future?'

‘Same for me’ said Bru ‘I remember thinking how great it would be if everyone could be on the same side, if only briefly. It’s how things should be, whatever our beliefs. It’ll never happen of course.’

‘You reckon the Disney and Universal guys will be on the same side?’ she said with a chuckle.

‘No question. They’re showmen, it’s all a big bluff. Got to go through their act’ said Bru, a picture of gigs in the band in front of a thousand people coming to mind, adrenalin instantly pumping through his veins.

‘Anyway, what do we do now?’ asked Olivia ‘still no raft to get over the river. And even if we did, what the heck would we find? May as well head back to the fort, get the fire stoked up.’

‘I reckon so’ replied Bru, both of them turning towards the steps above the shelter. ‘Hang on’ he said, stopping suddenly. Something had caught his eye. Beneath Aunt Polly’s, on the porch by the water, a string of lights shone just brightly enough for him to make out the rocking chairs ... only now they were moving slowly back and forth. Taking Olivia’s hand, they moved closer, the lights seemed to be fizzing, creating an audible crackling sound, whilst the chairs continued to rock gently. A series of wooden posts linked by rope bordered the short walkway between them and the veranda.

The instant they stepped on to the first board, a post-cap lit up brightly. Expecting the others to follow suit, they continued a few steps along the walkway, only to find that just the one solitary cap was illuminated. It was clearly significant, the invitation irresistible.

‘Got to do it’ said Bru ‘in fact, let’s do it together.’

Holding hands, they placed them on top of the post-cap, the effect instantaneous, a series of wide golden stepping stones rising from the dark river, gradually extending in a smooth arc to the far side of the water. Without any hesitation, Bru stepped confidently on to the first, holding out a hand for Olivia and, together, they moved fearlessly over the Rivers of America one glowing step at a time.

‘Hope this isn’t like the slabs in Indiana Jones when he’s after the idol’ laughed Bru, glancing behind as they approached the mid-way-point, noting that the glowing stones behind were gradually fading, making the lights under Aunt Polly’s porch seem brighter by contrast.

‘I can see figures in the rocking chairs, can you?’ gasped Olivia ‘can’t make out any features but I’m sure I’m right.’

‘Thought they’d all gone over to MGM’ said Bru, squinting in the direction of the island ‘maybe a couple stayed behind.’

Waving hopefully, the only response was a glint of red, like someone taking a pull on a cigarette or a pipe. Overhead, the ceiling of stars was still busy, the occasional flash and smear of light meaning that the war between the Studios was far from over.

‘I’d like to think one of those light trails is Santa’ said Olivia ‘or ET perhaps?’

Turning back, assuming they must, by now, be more than halfway across the river to the mainland, a cascade of strings appeared from nowhere and the river all around them took on a golden hue, mingling with the stepping-stones ahead.

With each step forward, Big Thunder and the whole of Frontier land spectacularly came to life, section by section, like a huge painting being unveiled, the orange buttes of the Mountain slowly taking shape like an early morning sunrise. Now there were people on the sidewalks, the excited squeals of passengers on the roller coaster cleaving the night air, hundreds crowding around the edge of the river, as if to greet them when they arrived, the real reason becoming clear a few moments later.

The strings faded, a feeling of expectancy and anticipation filling the void. The spell was broken by the first explosion, as fireworks above the castle lit up the sky behind them, a myriad of colours painting a tapestry across the black canvas.

‘Let’s get to the mainland’ cried Olivia, seizing Bru’s hand and hopping fearlessly over the remaining stones ‘still feel as though I might fall in’ she added with a giggle.

At the final leap on to the dock, gasps from the crowd, music and detonations all merged into one loud whooshing sound as Olivia and Bru were swept up in a vortex, within seconds looking down on the whole park, the outline of each of the lands clearly visible, fireworks crashing around them in a kaleidoscope of colour. After less than a minute, the hubbub of the Magic Kingdom melted gently away, a soft, warm, lilting voice crooning ‘Have yourself a merry little Christmas’ as they slowly opened their eyes, a golden sunrise streaming through the open blind, a golden river of light reflected in the Atlantic Ocean outside their window.

‘Did you set the radio alarm?’ asked Olivia, blinking as she turned over to Bru.

‘No’ replied Bru ‘didn’t know there was one.’

‘Neither did I. So, how did that happen? Had one heck of a dream last night’ she said, recalling bits of the adventure but struggling with the jumble of details washing around inside her head.

‘Me too’ sighed Bru, kissing her gently ‘got trapped on the island. That was weird. A campfire too? Thought we’d have to spend the night there.’ He laughed softly, the smile fading as she sat up briskly, her mouth open, searching for appropriate words ... any words.

‘Don’t tell me’ whispered Bru. She nodded, looking deep into his eyes.

‘I met Walt, how about you?’ she said. It was his turn to nod.

‘Pirate Captain?’

‘Yep. Leota?’

‘A couple of ghosts?’

‘Yes, oh yes. This is crazy Bru. What was it they told us?’ she asked in excited frustration.

‘Pretty sure it was about what’s in the pipeline, but I can’t remember’ he replied.

‘This is nuts’ she said ‘what was Biff doing there?’

‘You saw that too? And the Beetlejuice guy?’

‘Last thing I remember was standing in the middle of the river’ he added with a laugh.

'We saw other characters. Weren't we going to check things out?' she said, leaping out of bed, desperate to start the day.

'Something about Thunder and the Pirates ride.' He thought for a moment then stood up firmly.

'Yes' that's it' he said 'I wanted to check on the music man in Pirates.'

'The banjo guy?' she asked.

'Maybe a mandolin. Only one way to find out' he said, both of them vaulting into the bathroom.

'What was it we needed to see on Thunder?' he added.

'The guy in the bathtub' she cried from the bathroom 'bit like me really.'

'Hang on, one tiny little drawback' he said slowly.

'What's that?' she cried 'come on, get a move on.'

'We're not at the kingdom' he sighed, opening the shutters to be greeted by a deep blue ocean, remnants of snow on the grass reminding him that winter in New England still had a few months longer to weave its icy spell.

She walked slowly back out into the bedroom laughing, hugged him and sighed.

'How easily we get swept away, and we can be at the kingdom any time we like. We can dream it' she said 'when do you think you can find a window, to visit I mean? How's the recording going?'

'Ahead of schedule, we'll be done easily by late March' he replied 'then we get back to the magic, okay?'

'Oh yes ... please' she said, a tear running down her cheek 'that was so real last night Bru, I can't believe we weren't there.'

'No wonder we leapt up, ready to head for the parks. I was tasting tonga toast too' said Bru, sniffing the air in anticipation. 'Straight after Christmas, I'll get it booked.' He added decisively.

It was delightful to think that every single moment of every day was magical now they were together, their whole existence marinated in the wonder and enchantment of their beloved Disneyworld. Christmas morning together in New England was almost as special as being at the Polynesian, looking out over the lagoon to the spires of Cinderella Castle, hearing the announcement on the monorail, knowing that imagination could take them to the magic any time they wished.

**Welcome aboard the Walt Disney World monorail, your highway in the sky to the Magic Kingdom.**

'Your wish is my command, tonga toast it is' she said, still glowing from the hot shower 'I got the exact recipe and we'll just imagine we're sitting in the Kona. We can do that ...play me a couple of Christmas songs.'

'How do you manage to look so amazing in so little time?' he said softly, pulling her to him and sharing the tenth kiss of the morning 'do I need a south sea island shirt?'



'We can imagine that as well' she replied, heading to the kitchen and rummaging in a cupboard for pans, while Bru pulled back drapes from the French windows and flung open the doors to a small balcony overlooking the ocean, encountering an icy breeze that was at odds with the brilliant sunshine. Shivering, he swiftly closed the doors and was making his way towards the piano, when his eyes were drawn to a small package lying on the mat by the front door.

'Any ideas?' he asked, moving to the table and beckoning her over, examining the envelope from every side, shaking it gently and even smelling it, much to Olivia's annoyance.

'For heaven's sake' she cried, seizing and tearing it open.

With a gentle chink of metal on metal, several objects fell to the floor. Bru collected them, knowing instinctively what they were, and moved closer to the window, holding each of the Disney pins up to the light, passing them to Olivia wordlessly, as she read out the inscriptions one by one.

'Great Movie Ride.'

'20,000 Leagues under the sea.'

'Horizons.'

'Toad's Wild Ride.'

'Discovery Island.'

'Is this one of your Christmas pranks?' she said, knowing the answer.

'I was about to ask you the same' he replied, their eyes meeting.

'But ... why these? Oh Bru, it's to do with last night isn't it?' she said in amazement.

'I can't even come up with a clever answer. Perhaps it's another dream' he muttered 'but something in the back of my head tells me that these attractions are on borrowed time' he said 'wish I could remember what they told us. Is there anything else in the envelope?'

She picked it up from the table and gasped as she reached inside.

'Another pin' she said slowly, passing it to him 'how on earth ...'

'Tom Sawyer Island' he read as they turned, further fragments of the dream flirting with the recall button, emotions on a knife-edge, an air of delicious confusion washing around them, both feeling a sense of oneness with the man who created the magic in the first place.

'That's not all' she whispered, pulling a small piece of paper from inside the envelope, holding it out so that they could each plainly see the solitary letter, the style of the single **W** unmistakable.

'Just in case there was ever any doubt' she said softly 'Merry Christmas sweetheart.'

'Merry Christmas, my beautiful lady' echoed Bru.

'Merry Christmas Walt' they said in unison 'and thanks' added Olivia.

'Now for the tonga toast' said Bru, rubbing his hands together 'lunch with Megan and Jay later. Don't think they'll be ready to hear about our adventure last evening.'

'Wonder if Walt will turn up again tonight?' she said, the fragrant smell of fresh coffee drawing them into the kitchen. 'He said to look him up whenever we're at the kingdom.'  
'Let's see if we can find him later' she said 'pretty sure we will.'

The End

