

Joho

Joyride (English)

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Vorwort

I've written this story as an entry to a short story contest on Jeff's Fort Board (<http://www.jeffs-fortboard.com>).

But I think it stands on its own, so it's published here as well.

As always, thanks to Darryl for his tremendous effort in editing this. I was a bit lazy while writing this, so I was close to the deadline when I was finishing. And without objection, Darryl agreed to edit it as soon as I finished it, and I got it back within four hours. I can't thank you enough for that, Darryl!

All remaining errors are my sole responsibility.

Feedback to this is appreciated, of course. As a friendly author puts it so well: »Feedback is the only payment we receive!«, and I can wholeheartedly agree to this. Besides my own drive to write, feedback is the thing that keeps me going if it doesn't look so good at that moment. So don't hesitate to send me a note, I won't bite, I promise!

Joyride

The ringing of my alarm clock pulled me out of the pitch black of my sleep. I tried to fight the sound of the annoying alarm out of my head, but it crawled mercilessly into my ear and pushed the blackness out. Just when I finally had decided to give in to the urging of it, a loud bang on the door of my room startled me, and woke me fully in an instant.

»Hey, sleepyhead, do you want to miss the great day?«, sounded the voice of Ternanos from the other side of the door. That got me better awake than the loud banging on my door. The feeling of apprehension I had nurtured over the last....hmm....maybe 12 years returned in an instant.

VACATION! One, glorious day of time off my job. I mean it doesn't sound like much, but when you get only one day of vacation every hundred years, even one day is great. And it was even better: It was MY turn to decide what we would do on our day off. And it would be nothing like the last vacation we had.

I mean, how unimaginative can it be: Going 24h of DRINKING in a club in Paris? Thortos looked forward so much to that day, and then slept at least half of the time after his fifth Zombie. He has 24h hours to get drunk to the boot, and he starts with the hardest stuff they have on the drinking menu. And that after a hundred years of abstinence.

I admit, it was a great day, and even a greater night, but when it was my turn to decide what to do, I didn't even have to think for a second what we would do. Every time after I picked up that one grandparent from Disney World after a stroke, I wanted to actually BE there, enjoy the rides and just enjoy a day of carefree fun.

Being death can be a harsh job, and I didn't need to just go out drinking and talking about work with my two colleagues. I want to have fun, and going to an amusement park seemed the best way to do it.

The job may sound stressful to you, but it isn't that bad. We don't have to accompany everyone into the afterlife who dies, most will just feel being pulled into a white light. We are only there for the harder cases, people who think that they have unfinished business in their life, and who need some careful nudging into the right direction. And doing the job with three people means that everyone has an eight hour shift "on the job", then 8 hours of standby, and then 8 hours of rest.

I used to do the job with just one other colleague, 12 hour shifts, but when the unions came up on Earth, both of us went on a strike, getting HIM to get a third colleague for both of us, and vacation. We couldn't get our wish of 1 day a year of vacation, HE said that would be too suspicious if every year no people would die for a whole day (they couldn't

take the risks and leaving someone behind, because we wouldn't be there to guide them, so nobody will die for a whole day), but I mean it is better than nothing.

The only downfall of this vacation would be that we couldn't go with our normal bodies there, because of that stupid bet. In Paris in the last century, Ternanos started talking about us being like a family, and somehow that idea got stuck in Thortos' head, drunken as he was. So when I told them where we would be going, he dared me to go there as a real family. I objected to it, but he wouldn't stop talking about it, and so we agreed to settle it in a competition on the job. Over one year, we would count who would loose more souls, wanting to stay behind and who couldn't be convinced going to the afterlife. The one loosing more would loose the competition, and thus the bet.

To make a long story short, it was a very close competition. Finally I lost to one soul being left behind, someone I had to take while being on standby. So we had to go there as a family.

But we couldn't agree who should be what, and we hadn't time for another competition on the job. So we drew straws, and I would be the child of the family. It wouldn't be as nice as being the father, but a LOT better than being the mother.

Death has always been a very masculine job, so nobody wanted to be the woman. We nearly had a fight about it, but came to our senses luckily soon enough, and agreed on drawing straws. Ternanos lost, Thortos won, and I'm not sure if I had lost or won.

I had thought long about what kind of child I would go to Disney World as. It was clear that it had to be a boy, I wouldn't even consider a girl. But the question of the age was difficult. I finally settled for someone between twelve and fourteen, big enough to go onto all rides, but still child enough being able to act stupid without someone thinking anything about it. This would be SO perfect.

I had met the ideal candidate for "my" body four weeks ago. I mean, I could take the shape of anybody, but it is just so much easier having a "template" to model my appearance after. It had been a thirteen year old dutch boy, blond hair, pale blue eyes, just coming back from a vacation, so he had quite a nice tan. He had died in a car accident on the way to a friend; had been run over after he hadn't looked both ways before crossing. Quite a sad story, and he thought that he had still something to do on earth, watching over the friend he was on the way to, but I convinced him that enough people would look over him, and reluctantly, he had accepted my guidance.

Him being from the Netherlands was quite good, as I couldn't take someone from the US, it was just too risky that someone would recognize him there.

I took the crystal ball into my hands, the one I had stored his features into after I had led him to the afterlife, and I took a look into it. I saw his face, eyes closed, as when he was sleeping. I knew it was the way his family saw him at the mourning service.

Closing my eyes, I steeled myself for the nausea which always accompanied a shape change. I could feel the crystal ball in my left hand, and extended my right hand, hovering a short distance over the surface of the ball and concentrated, willing myself to change.

I could actually feel my bones shrinking, a sensation I would never get used to, but at least I couldn't see the ground rushing up to me, which made it a bit more bearable.

Opening my eyes again, I took a look into the mirror, and the features of my "template" looked back at me. I tilted my head slightly sideways, and looked critically at the image, in case I had forgotten or overlooked something. But everything seemed perfect to me.

I heard the door opening behind me, and heard the voice of Ternanos, starting to say: »Thalos, are you.....«, but quickly fading into a silence, and I heard the door being closed again abruptly. I looked at the door, frowning, not knowing what could have caused that reaction. I looked down on "my" body, checking for some horrible open sores or if my guts were dripping out of a gash in my stomach, but even that shouldn't have startled him. I mean, he is an incarnation of DEATH, he is used to the worst!

Then it dawned on me: In my excitement of the vacation, I had forgotten to let clothes appear on my new body. And Ternanos, being from a Victorian upbringing, still had problems with nudity. I hadn't these problems, coming from a more "relaxed" century, so I just shook my head and chuckled.

Quickly closing my eyes again, I concentrated on the clothes I wanted to wear. Nothing too fancy, but I had informed myself quite well what children these days were wearing. And as we were going to Florida and it would be warm, I just wanted something light. A nice t-shirt (white, with a black skull on it, I just couldn't deny my job), some khaki pants, knee long, and sneakers which would have cost half a months worth of salary back on Earth. But luckily I wasn't restrained by such mundane things as money.

I left my room shortly after that, and saw Ternanos still standing in the passageway with a beet red face. He started to stutter: »I...I'm really sorry, I didn't want to see..«, at which point I cut him off sharply: »Come on, Ternanos, don't be such a jerk. I mean, I was just standing naked there. Its no big deal. We've worked now together for a good 150 years, and you still think you could intrude into something private?«

»But...but....you were naked!«

I just rolled my eyes, all of my arguments would be wasted on him. Changing the subject, I asked Ternanos: »When is Thortos' shift ending and our vacation will start?«

Ternanos pulled out his big hour glass, and glanced quickly at it: »2 minutes until noon, then we are free to go.«

We stood there for the remaining minutes, both just lost in our thoughts. I had memorized the map of Disney World, just going over the list again, what attractions I wanted to ride.

When the time was up, a shadow appeared beside us, quickly materializing into Thortos. I laughed aloud when I saw him taking shape. He must have already switched his form while coming back to us. He was the perfect image of a tourist. Big bellied, covered by a Hawaiian shirt, some really awful shorts, a straw hat and a camera hanging around his neck. He really seemed to look forward to our vacation as well, as he had a big grin plastered on his face.

He stretched out his arms, turning around slowly and saying in a mocking voice: »Am I suitable for the big day?«

I put my hand on his shoulder and said, still half laughing: »Just perfect, my old friend!«

Ternanos had a sour look on his face, I don't think he saw the humor in it. He is sometimes as stiff as when you had shoved a walking stick up his.....

I turned to him, saying in a more earnest voice: »Go ahead, change.«

He let out a low sigh, just accepting his fate, pulling out a crystal ball, very similar to the one I had used. He put his hand hovering over it as well, and I saw a stream of pale red light coming out of it, shortly afterwards enclosing his whole body.

I stared at him with a look of pure disbelief on my face when I saw the choice of his body. He had chosen a woman which could be only described as Victorian. A long black dress, a forbidding face and a tight bun.

Thortos snickered besides me, quickly trying to stifle it, which got him an angry glare from Ternanos. He asked in an icy voice: »Don't you like MY MOTHER?«

Getting a horrified look on his face, Thortos started to stutter: »Erm, no, she is....fine, really, but don't you think you should change into something....lighter for Florida?«

Considering this for a moment, Ternanos said slowly: »Yes, maybe you are right.« He got a concentrated face for a moment, and his black dress melted into a slightly wider, cream colored dress, but still looking very tight and uncomfortable. I guessed this was the best that he will agree upon, and I shot Thortos a quick look, trying to silence him. Exactly

the same moment he looked at me, and by just grinning, we both knew we shouldn't make another comment about Ternanos. Working together for an odd 800 years has its advantages.

I tried to settle into my role as the excited child of the family, and took them both by the hand, dragging them along the hallway, yelling excitedly: »Come on, you two, we will be late!«

While I dragged them along, I concentrated on relocating us to Florida, and finally the world faded around us.....

I ran down the steps from Splash Mountain, still laughing my butt off at the expression on Ternanos face when the big wave had hit him, getting him dripping wet. I looked over my shoulder, seeing him following me with a sour expression on his face. I spotted Thortos, still standing at the outdoor bar next to Splash Mountain, already swaying a bit from his umpteenth beer for the day.

I guess it had been a mistake going into Space Mountain first, as it got Thortos puking when we got out of it, and he plainly refused to go into another ride for the day. He said that he would be perfectly content looking at me, having fun. Ternanos, or Miss Mary as I called him for the day, had to come along on the rides with me, they wouldn't allow me alone. Luckily, his sense of duty was bigger than his resentment of the rides, and he thought he owed me having a good day.

So I dragged him off into every ride I could find, and he silently came with me. He didn't seem to enjoy himself very much, but certainly I was enjoying myself enough for both of us.

I thought that I would have to give him a break after this. Noon in Florida was approaching, and I already felt the hunger building up in me. Having a real body for a change has it disadvantages as well. I quickly went over the food places next to Splash Mountain; it shouldn't be very much, just a light lunch, as I had planned a real dinner in a nice restaurant in Orlando, as a bit of compensation for Ternanos. He really liked good food, and I had chosen a good restaurant which had also a fine drinking menu, for Thortos.

Glancing again over my shoulder, checking if Miss Mary was still following me, my run came to crashing halt, when I ran into another boy.

I started to apologize to him, when I saw his wide eyes, his face loosing all color, as if he had seen a ghost. Technically this was correct, but my mind was reeling at once.

It looked like I had run into someone who knew the boy in whom I had incarnated. I knew I just had to get away from him, not giving away myself, spoiling this perfect day. It would make HIM very angry if this was discovered.

I tried to turn on the spot, looking down, hiding my face. But my body wouldn't move, and a voice inside my head just screamed 'Nooooooooooooooooooooo!'

I heard a silent sobbing in mind, which just said quietly over and over again: 'Maarten, my poor Maarten....'.

My eyes were still fixed on the boy in front of me, I just couldn't turn them away. I had no control over my own body! His sandy colored hair was spiked up a bit, and in the corners of his azure blue eyes, tears started to form. He had a look of pure disbelief on his face.

He started to extend his hand into my direction, and I tried to pull back from him, but I still had no control over my body. So I just saw the hand closing in on me, and I couldn't do a thing to stop it.

With the slightest touch, the boy put his hand on my cheek, and his disbelieving face turned into a huge smile, and he whispered: »Sander, I just knew that you wouldn't leave me.«

A sense of pure joy, love and contentment radiated from that part of my mind which had sobbed quietly just seconds ago. And my body started to move toward the other boy, Maarten as I knew now, and I just couldn't do anything to stop it. It was like an invisible force pulled me towards him, and before I knew it, I was embraced into a full hug.

The sensation of the first bodily contact in an eternity overwhelmed me, and without anything left in me to resist, Maarten put his mouth on mine and just gave me a kiss which put my feelings on an even bigger roller coaster ride.

And with that, everything around me just went white.....

Once I regained my senses, the first I felt was an emptiness in me, something was missing which had been there, just a couple of seconds ago.

I started to look around, but couldn't make out much in this all enveloping white. Just the two boys standing beside me, still enveloped in a tight hug, kissing. And when I saw them, a huge feeling of loss, together with a strong emotion of regret flooded up in me. I looked down, and saw that I was back into my normal body, separated from the child I had been just a minute ago.

Staring at the two of them, who were still deeply caught in their own world, I felt tears welling up in my eyes, tears for something I apparently had lost right now, after having it for the first time in an eternity.

Just then, I saw some movement out of the corner of my eyes, and when I turned to look at it, it was my turn to look in awe and wonder. Instinctively I knelt down and bowed my head when HE arrived on the scene. I should have known what to expect, having been here a couple of times, in HIS private study, but I was too overwhelmed with different things this time to notice where I was.

»RISE, THALOS, MY LOYAL SERVANT!« The two boys quickly pulled their hands over their ears, not being used to the level of HIS voice. I took a deep breath to calm myself down, and asked: »Could you please tone down your voice a bit, Holy One? Just to make the little ones more comfortable and not hurt them.«

HE gave me one of his rare smiles, and continued in a much lower voice: »This was always your defining trait, Thalos: You always thought of others before yourself. Although I had to bury it a bit deeper in your conscience, so you would be useful for the work I had laid upon you.«

HE sighed in a low tone, and continued: »It made you very valuable in your line of work, even if it had to be dampened a bit. Your caring for others, and your knowledge made you my perfect emissary. But I always knew that I couldn't suppress these things indefinitely. Or do you think you can just go back to work after what you have experienced this day?«

I thought about it for a moment, taking a good look at the boy couple beside me and had to admit: »It will be very hard, I think, but I will manage.«

»But do you want to manage?«

Bitterness came into my voice when I responded: »But I don't have a choice here. My job is permanent, I just can't resign, so it is not of importance if I want to manage or not.«

I think I saw a slight smile in HIM, although it was hard to make it out through the light HE radiated from all over his body.

»Well, let's just say there is an option of resignation. It is rarely granted, and I don't want it to become public knowledge that you can retire, but there have been preceding occasions.....«

At this revelation, my head snapped up: »I thought, that once I agree becoming death, it's forever!«

»That is what I told you, and normally it is that way. You can't resign from your own, free will, but I can offer it to you when I see fit. And I just think that we have a fitting situation here.«

HE now addressed the two boys: »Maarten, Sander, would you please come here and join our discussion? I have a difficult decision in front of me, and I would like your input.«

Both boys looked thunderstruck, but slowly shuffled over to where I was standing with HIM, not letting go of the hand of the other one. They stood before us, looking like a perfect set of angels to me, and again the feeling of loss welled up in me.

HE then directly addressed the two of them: »You may not have seen Thalos before, but both of you know him, in one way or another. Sander, Thalos was the one who led you to the afterlife, as you already know. Maarten, Thalos was also in the body of your friend Sander when you kissed him just there in Florida. You should know, he is one of the people working for me, leading people to the afterlife, and he has done a terrific job of it, for more than 800 years now, and I would like to reward him for the services he has given to me over the centuries.«

I stared at HIM in shock again, this was not what I had expected. And what role would the two boys play in this?

HE continued then: »I had to remove some parts of Thalos soul, or to dampen them, so that he would be able to be my emissary properly, and not be bothered by it too much. I had to remove some of his pity, his caring for others, and other feelings he had in a vast amount. After a couple of months, I even had to take away his nightly dreams, as he would just relive the horrible things he saw over the day, and he was very near to a breakdown. When I asked you, Sander, if he may use your body for this vacation of his, you agreed upon it with the request of being with him for the day, just seeing the wonders of earth once more before you settle into the afterlife. When I allowed this, you effectively filled the holes in Thalos soul, and he became whole again, without realizing it. When Sander saw you, Maarten, he took over, pushing Thalos out of control of the body, wanting to see you again. This is the part I don't understand completely yet: Why were you there, so far away from home?«

Maarten cleared his throat, and said, a bit hoarsely: »When Sander died, I was devastated. I hadn't seen him for a couple of weeks, when he was on vacation, and he was on the way to me for our first meeting after it. Then he was killed by the car, without me seeing him again once more, which put me in a great depression. After seeing this for some weeks, my parents finally announced that a change of scenery would do me good, and went with me to Disney World, something which I always wanted to see. But it was not real

fun, doing it without Sander there. I enjoyed it a bit, but was also sad, and then I just saw him.....« and his voice trailed off.

HE seemed to be lost in thought for a moment, then HE seemingly made up his mind, and continued, addressing me again: »I honestly don't think that you could perform your job properly, with the memories of these feelings in your mind. Of course, I could just wipe them out of your mind....«

I stared at HIM horror struck. There was no way that I wanted to lose these feelings, as HE had said, they just completed me. But then HE continued: »....but it seems highly unfair to me, after these long years of service and loyalty you gave to me. I will make an offer to you: I will allow you to return to Earth, and live another human lifespan. But I just can't restore your soul as it has been before you started your work for me. If I would let you return to Earth in the state you are currently in, you will always feel incomplete. But luckily, we have a solution for this at our hand as well.«

HE turned his attention to Sander once more: »Would you like to return to life as well?« Shyly, Sander nodded his head, after glancing towards Maarten for just a second.

Very gently HE put HIS hand on Sander's shoulder, and continued: »But you understand that it has been your time to go from Earth, don't you?«

With this, Maarten cried out: »Nooooo! It can't be, he can't leave me again!«, and tears started to flow from his eyes again.

But Sander nodded again and said, nearly in a whisper: »Yes, Thalos explained it to me after that car ran me over, it was just my time to let go....«

HE nodded gravely, and said to him: »So it has been written in the Book of Life. I just can't restore you to life.«

Sander hung his head, and I visibly saw him squeezing Maarten's hand. But then HE continued: »But as you seem the perfect complement to Thalos' soul, I will offer to you that you go back to Earth with him, as one soul once more. Not like it has been today, but truly being one. And as Thalos still needs a body in which to go back to Earth, and he seems to have taken a liking to yours, you may share that as well.....«

Sander looked up to him, obviously pondering the offer: »But.....will it still be me, going back?«

HE smiled: »Yes, and no. It will still be you, but it will be Thalos as well. You will be one, completing each other. Both of you will continue Sander's former life, but be assured that I will personally look over your well being. Nothing bad will come from this, I promise!«

Sander thought about it once again, then asked another question: »What about Maarten? Will he still love me, even if it is not completely me? And will I still love him?«

HE smiled: »You are really thinking this over, aren't you? I know you will love Maarten the same as before, as your love for him basically brought Thalos this offer. I can't speak for Maarten, but I assume that it will be no problem. Certain....imperfections you had, like being a bit careless, will be complemented by character traits Thalos' possesses, and it will make you just a better person. I can't think about anything which Maarten wouldn't love about you.«

HE looked at Maarten, who just nodded his head vigorously: »I will always love you, Sander!«

Sander smiled then, and had a determined expression on his face: »I want to do it then!«

HE laid HIS eyes on me once again, asking me the question which I had asked myself for the last minutes as well: »And you, Thalos? Would you like to accept the offer as well?«

When the two pairs of eyes from the boys snapped onto me, having a pleading expression on their faces, I just knew that I wouldn't be able to refuse. But I had to be sure about some things as well: »Don't you think that the memories of my work will be a problem? I know that these could drive every sane person insane, and I don't think Sander could handle those memories.«

»Again, not thinking of you, but of him. You can be assured, you won't have specific memories from your work. You will have knowledge and confidence. But I won't let any harm come onto you, or Sander, not after I have invested so much effort in you.« HE smiled once more.

»And what about my work? Thortos and Ternanos, they will just be swamped with work. I know how hard we had to work before Ternanos joined us!«

As if on cue, two shadows materialized on the opposite side of the room, quickly taking the shape of my two friends. Thortos spoke first: »Don't be stupid! This is a once in a hundred life times opportunity. You would be a fool if you don't take it!«, and he glared at me, daring me to argue with him.

Ternanos gave me one of his rare smiles, and said: »For once, I have to agree to Thortos. Think for yourself. I don't object to this, I have to look out for my family, and this will be just perfect for you. I saw today how much you enjoyed being a child again. And you will have love, what more do you want? Don't worry about us, we will find someone who will be willing to take the job, just as the two of you found me.«

Seeing that any resistance was futile against these two, the pleading eyes of the two boys, and my own hopes, I turned to HIM again: »Yes, I want to do this!«

»So mote it be. Sander, take the hands of Thalos and look him in the eyes.«

Sander did as he was told, and I looked back into his pale blue eyes. HE put his hand on our interlocked hands, and said once more in HIS booming voice: »SO LET THESE TWO SOULS BECOME ONE!«, and everything faded around me once more.

Just before I lost my consciousness, I heard the voice of Thortos whispering in my ear, in a mocking voice: »And don't you DARE to talk back to me once it is your time to go to the afterlife! I will be there to lead you myself.....«

I awoke the next morning, seeing Maarten's face, angel like in his sleep, just inches away from my own face, and felt his warm body pressed against my side. I just felt a deep love and contentment when I kissed him gently on the lips, and said: »Good morning, my love.....«

Nachwort

Editor's Notes:

Well Joho, I approve this story whole heartedly. It was beautiful. I used several boxes of tissues.

Very good indeed.

Darryl AKA The Radio Rancher