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Yule Parade

- by Angie

*If ever thy breast with freedom glowed,
And spurred a tyrant's chain,
Let not thy strong oppressive force
A free-born mouse detain.*

- Anna Laetitia Barbault (1743-1825)

Vincent and Catherine had spent the weekend in their brownstone, preparing for the upcoming Yule and New Year celebrations, and enjoying some much-needed respite from the chaos that seemed to be the norm below at this time of year.

When they entered the tunnels mid-Monday morning, the pipes were clattering with messages which almost overlapped. The most common word they could discern was "Mouse". The rest seemed incomprehensible. They looked at each other. Vincent sighed.

"It doesn't seem to be an emergency," he remarked dryly.

"No, but I suppose we'd better go straight to Father and find out what's going on."

As they neared Father's chamber they could hear that a noisy discussion was underway. They stood for a few moments in the entrance trying to make sense of it. They looked down on several knots of people chattering and gesticulating. Father looked harassed, although he was watching rather than contributing. He happened to spot the couple and immediately raised his hand and beckoned them in.

"Thank goodness you're back, Vincent."

They went down the stairs and the crowd opened up before them. The noise abated somewhat, but Father still had to raise his voice to talk to the new arrivals.

"There seems to be a mystery here, Vincent, but it's one our intrepid Mouse refuses to enlighten us about."

"Not a mystery," Mouse shouted from the gallery above Father. Everyone looked up, apparently surprised to find him there.

"Then where did you find these items?" Father demanded. Obviously, this was a crucial question, since it was greeted by such a loud racket that Vincent's ears rang.

He looked at Catherine and she nodded.

"STOP!" he roared. Silence fell immediately and Father looked ruefully at his son.

"Thank-you, Vincent. Now I think this can be sorted out without further annoyance. Please, everyone go back to your business, except Mouse. We'll issue a ... a ... report."

There were murmurs, but the crush of people obediently filed up the stairs and out of the chamber. When the last back had turned the corner, Father gave a huge sigh of relief and looked around.

“Mouse?”

“Here,” he said from behind Father, making him jump. Catherine stifled a giggle and Vincent tried to look sternly at Mouse.

“Good. Now please sit down. You two as well, please. We shall try and proceed like sensible people.”

When everyone was seated, Father began the tale. It appeared that some rather large, man-made objects had appeared in various community chambers - the dining room, the schoolroom and the children’s dormitory. There were two large, wooden cut-outs - two of snowmen and one reindeer - and a large inflatable Santa Claus which currently gracing a corner of Father’s chamber on top of a pile of books. Catherine had to stifle a chuckle again. The Santa had been repaired with duct tape and looked much the worse for wear.

All the objects had apparently been “found” by Mouse, who nodded vigorously in agreement.

“We don’t know where he found them, so we are naturally concerned. Mouse?”

Mouse rolled his eyes and sighed.

“Wanted them to be a surprise. Plenty more. Very dusty. No one goes there.”

“Where?” Vincent asked.

“Hard to explain. Can take you there. Maybe then Father will stop yelling and everyone will stop ... nattering.”

“Father?”

“Oh, please do go, Vincent, if you wouldn’t mind. I can wait for your report.”

“Can we go now, Mouse?”

“Ok good, ok fine. Catherine too? Might need help to get more stuff. Need lantern. Very dark there.”

Vincent looked at Catherine. She smiled.

“Oh, I wouldn’t miss this for the world!”

The three rose and Father sighed with relief and sat down with a grunt when they were out of sight. It never failed. When Vincent was away, something always happened to disturb the peace. He sat back in his chair and closed his eyes. He suspected he was getting to old for this kind of thing.

After Vincent had found a lantern, Mouse led the way upwards and then along some obviously disused and increasingly dim old subway thoroughfares. Vincent lit the lantern and walked behind Catherine and Mouse, holding it up high to light their pathway ahead.

“I haven’t been this way since I was a boy,” Vincent commented.

Eventually, they approached what looked like a dead end, but which became a right angle turn hiding a recessed chain link gate, long off its hinges, at the head of a narrow corridor with a three widely-spaced green metal doors. Mouse opened the gate and pulled on the first handle. It moved slowly, so Vincent lent his weight to it and it creaked open.

Mouse pulled a flashlight from a capacious pocket, turned it on and led the way in.

“Other rooms empty,” he offered as he led the way in. Vincent rolled his eyes at Catherine when they exchanged glances, but they said nothing.

They entered and stood stunned. Vincent shifted the lantern until he found a dirty light switch near the door. Turning it on did little, however. A dim bulb some distance away revealed a large room filled with amorphous bulky objects, made even more mysterious by the shadows cast by their lantern. To one side of the door were a stack of large flat platforms with wheels.

It seemed, as their eyes adjusted, like a giant's storeroom. Everything was oversized, dwarfing even Vincent. Catherine soon began to smile and then chuckled. Both Vincent and Mouse stared at her mute. "Sorry," she said. "I just realized what we're looking at. These are pieces used on parade floats. They must have been forgotten. I bet these rooms are owned by the city."

She sneezed. Mouse had been right about the dust. It lay thick on everything, turning what they could see a dull grey. She wiped a finger over a large round object and an eye peered out at her. She giggled.

"I don't understand," Vincent admitted after a long silence. "Why has no one been down here?"

Catherine gave the two men a wry smile.

"My guess is that someone was in charge of storing this stuff for a group a long time ago. It would be considered obsolete now. Too old and in poor repair. "

Catherine looked around them and waved an arm, taking it all in.

"Every organized group has storage places with junk that was never inventoried and was probably written off long ago. Often when someone in charge dies, or leaves a group, that information - which was probably only in their head - is lost. If it had been important, someone would know. No one wants this stuff, obviously. I guess it didn't cost them anything to leave it here. I wonder how they got it all above when they did use it?"

"Door at back leads to freight elevator," Mouse answered. "Not far from our warehouse."

Vincent looked around and began to walk down an aisle between stacked objects. Catherine followed him and Mouse brought up the rear.

When they reached the back wall, Catherine gasped.

"Oh look, Vincent - a sleigh! It would make a wonderful set piece for Yule. It's wicker, so it won't weigh very much. And there, look ... there's the front end."

Vincent laughed and Mouse snorted.

"Can't move anything with that," Mouse declared, unnecessarily.

"No, but the children will love it," Catherine remarked.

"I don't think we can carry this back to the Great Hall," Vincent said.

"Not enough room in tunnels," Mouse agreed. "But big room up there." He pointed overhead.

"We should look," Vincent suggested. "Is the elevator working, Mouse?"

"Not yet. Needs power. Will fix later. Stairs over there." He led the way to the access stairs and took them up a floor.

They emerged into a large room with a few, even larger items and more dust. It had obviously had no visitors in a very long time. One end of the room had large metal double doors.

"Where are we?" Catherine asked. "I don't see any windows. It should be still daylight outside."

"Waiting room?" Mouse suggested.

"Yes, in a way. A marshalling room," Catherine guessed.

Mouse nodded. "Door goes to parking garage, but door locked and bolted from other side. Didn't open it. Garage empty and messy. Lots of garbage. Locked gate on front."

"Maybe we can use this room to make the children a surprise Toyland for Yule, Vincent," Catherine suggested.

He looked around and nodded.

"We must be sure there is no danger of attracting attention. I know where we are. I'll return tonight and scout the streets outside. "

Mouse sighed. "Suppose so. Lot of work, though."

“Yes,” Vincent agreed. “We will need work parties to clean up this room and bring up some of the objects from downstairs.”

“I’ll organize that,” Catherine offered. “This will be fun!”

Two days later, work was well underway, Vincent having determined that there would be no interruptions from outside, no matter how much noise they made. The room was soundproof and the district was mostly vacant. Their own warehouse was close enough that they could station a sentry there to watch for intruders.

Mouse had managed to find power for the freight elevator and a parade of objects had been placed against the walls of the upper room for cleaning. A bucket brigade of teenagers was cleaning them under Brooke’s direction. As they finished cleaning and doing some paint touch-ups with Elizabeth’s help, Rebecca, Olivia and Lena told the men where to place them. They had worked out a rough floor plan. The larger items had been strategically placed and those not wanted were covered with huge canvas drop sheets they had found downstairs. Other groups were decorating the room and adding some special treats in strategic places, courtesy of Catherine.

Catherine and Mary were discussing how they would transport the children. It was not a great distance, but the smaller children might need a ride. Mouse, who was listening in, beckoned them down the stairs again. The room was now brighter with new light bulbs, but dust hung thick in the air. Both women put on dust masks.

Mouse led them left around the wall a short distance, then stopped and pointed. Catherine peered around him and gasped. There were two very small tractors, obviously used to pull floats, but as dusty and seemingly neglected as the rest of the collection.

“Will they work?,” Mary asked.

“Don’t know,” Mouse replied. “Electric. Batteries. Didn’t try.”

“Can we charge them?” Catherine asked.

“Maybe - use power for elevator.”

Mary sighed. “Perhaps you could try and get one working, Mouse,” she suggested.

“Ok good - need screwdriver.” Mouse ran back the way they had come and Mary and Catherine looked at the tractors.

“Well, at least they aren’t rusty - I don’t think,” Catherine commented.

Later that day, Mouse reported that one of the tractors was working. It had been properly turned off, and had not discharged badly, he told them. The other would not start and seemed to have been damaged.

“I think perhaps one will be enough if we can pull one or two float beds behind it.” Mary told him.

“No problem,” Mouse told her. “Can pull three or four. Stuff for floats weighs more than children.”

As Yule neared, some of the excitement was transmitted to the children. They knew something was afoot, but the adults were careful to say nothing. There were a lot of trips back and forth to the Great Hall, since that was where the Yule food, gifts and main entertainment would be. The fact that some of the adults continued onward to the storage room went unnoticed in the excitement of seeing the Great Hall open and filling up with good things.

It had been decided that the children would be taken to Toyland after Yule breakfast, and allowed to stay until the party began in the Great Hall, just before lunch. That would keep them from getting underfoot during the final preparations, for which William was grateful.

Finally, Toyland was ready and there was one day until Yule. The tunnel work crews regarded their handiwork with pride. Now that she was no longer working, Catherine realized it was quite chilly in the

room. Of course it was winter outside and this room was concrete with no insulation.

Suddenly, the floor shook and a loud rumble sounded up the stairway.

Vincent looked up in shock and immediately ran for the stairs, closely followed by his work crew. Catherine and the others followed.

When they reached the room below they could see nothing. The dust was even worse than usual. Vincent shouted from some distance away and other voices joined his with the sound of heavy objects being moved. Catherine and the others put on their dust masks and tried to move towards the voices.

They were eventually prevented from going further by a chaotic blockade of huge wooden, metal-bound trunks. Catherine could hear Mouse's name being called with increasing desperation and guessed that he had been the cause of the disruption. She waited with the others, her hands clasped, hoping for the best.

Abruptly there was a shout. The shuffling and other noises stopped and the dust slowly began to settle. Impatiently, Catherine climbed over a nearby trunk and threaded her way past piles of coloured stuff all over the floor. She saw Vincent's unmistakable figure and went to his side. He looked down at her with an expression of exasperation and relief.

In front of him, back against a wall, in a semi-circle of silent, dishevelled men, Mouse was sitting on the floor, his clothing ripped and covered with dust from head to toe. He was coughing and sneezing. Catherine guessed he was dazed too, but seemed otherwise unhurt. She breathed a sigh of relief.

Vincent helped Mouse to his feet and held him up until he stopped coughing.

"Winslow was right. You are the only Mouse with nine lives. I think you've used up another one," Vincent growled at him.

Mouse looked up at him and tears began to run down his dusty face, leaving two tracks.

"Are you alright, Mouse?" Catherine asked, concerned.

"Ok. Miss Winslow," he said, trying to smile. He sneezed again and wiped his hand over his nose, leaving a dirty streak that made him look like a bandit.

"Sorry," he said at last. Found stack of trunks. Wanted to see what was in them. Climbed up and one broke, then others fell. Managed to jump away just in time. Couldn't get out. Afraid more might fall. Dumb. Thank you."

He hung his head, ashamed.

Meanwhile, the air had cleared enough that they could see what had fallen from the burst trunks. Catherine gasped in disbelief.

"Costumes! Vincent, I bet we and the children could wear some of these! I always wondered what happened to parade costumes. These styles are old - I'd say from the 60's and 70s. Can we get some of them back to the tunnels?"

"We have to take the tractor and pull the flats back home to carry the children here - but there are too many," Vincent pointed out.

"Then we'd better choose well," Catherine declared. She and the other women immediately began rummaging through the spilled clothing and began sorting some into one of the emptied trunks.

Catherine purloined some clothing for herself and Vincent, and the rest was gradually sorted into five trunks - two for adults and three for teens and children.

"I think we're done," she said at last. The men had removed the broken trunks and put the unwanted ones against the wall. Mouse had backed up a string of flats and the trunks were quickly loaded onto them.

The walk back to the home tunnels was tiring, but they took turns sitting on the flats. Mouse was driving the tractor. Catherine felt as if she were sleepwalking. Even Vincent seemed to be shuffling a little.

"I think we will all sleep well tonight," he remarked as he and Catherine waved goodbye to the others and entered the tunnel entrance to their brownstone.

"Oh, I don't want to move tomorrow either," she told him.

"I think that can be arranged," he chuckled.

"But right now I want a hot bath. Care to join me?"

"Do you doubt it?"

A short time later, they were soaping each other in the bath, and not long after that were spooned together in bed. They were asleep in seconds.

The next day, the Yule Eve, the tunnel community rested and did the last minute preparations. Catherine and Vincent had delivered a sizeable pine tree from above a few days previously and the children were busy decorating it in the Great Hall. They had spent many days stringing popcorn and making paper chains, as well as riffling through the tunnel junk rooms looking for items they could hang on it. Mouse had found some fragile old ornaments in the storage room and had left them where they could be found by the children, along with a great golden star from the same place.

It all looked wonderful. Catherine suspected the children would not sleep well that night. She was more than a little excited herself, but knew Vincent could cure her of insomnia once they were in bed, which they were at last - and he did.

Yule morning began early with a breakfast in the dining hall. William had made muffins and baked bread, but not too much of anything. The main meal at lunchtime in the Great Hall would need plenty of appetite.

When the dishes were done, Father announced that the children should all go to the schoolroom for a special treat. Waiting for them were the trunks of clothing and in a surprisingly short time, every child was dressed in some fanciful item.

Catherine had found Vincent a red sweater, gold vest and corduroy pants, and she was wearing a pink suede coat with fur trim and a matching sweater and pants with long leather boots - a little too large. They were wearing scarves she had knit for them during special klatches over the past several months.

Vincent and Catherine were the host and hostess and led the excited children to the waiting tractor and float beds. Some carpet remnants had been placed on them for comfort and safety. Mouse, now in the costume of a parade marshal, drove slowly down the old tunnels, followed by members of the tunnel community. Everyone wanted to see the grand opening of Toyland.

They had to enter via the original storeroom and go up the freight elevator in groups. In the top room it was dim, lit only by a few candles near the elevator. When everyone was assembled, Vincent turned on the lights. There were gasps of delight from the adults and the children shouted with glee.

"Now, you may explore," Vincent declared, while Catherine turned on a tape player and festive music livened the room.

The children needed no more encouragement and were soon dancing merrily around the large snowmen, reindeer, elves, giant ornaments, and other festive items to the tune of Jingle Bell Rock and other festive tunes.

It wasn't long before they discovered that a particularly large snowman was offering them small candy canes, as was a giant stuffed Santa Claus. Small toys and noisemakers were discovered in small sleighs and burlap bags strewn around the feet of the characters. The room was soon as noisy as a carnival.

An hour later, the excitement had died down a little. The children had taken turns trying out the large

wicker sleigh, and Vincent and Catherine had agreed to pose there so Elizabeth could make some quick sketches.

Later, the couple move to a special decoration, one placed for the adults. It had a backdrop of canvas - covering an enormous fruit bowl - with a decorative mistletoe. Catherine looked up at Vincent and sighed.

"I wish I were taller - or these boots had high heels," she remarked.

Vincent quietly reached around a corner and brought forth a large wooden box, decorated like a gift. Catherine chuckles as she stood on it.

'You think of everything,' she whispered to him. They spent a long few minutes in a passionate embrace.

"I needed that," Catherine said at last, stroking his face, and meeting the turquoise passion in his eyes with her own green love.

"Always," Vincent agreed quietly, and sighed.

"They seem to be enjoying themselves," Catherine remarked when they returned to the action.

"I think they will remember this for a long time," he replied. "We could never better this."

"And perhaps shouldn't try. Let it become legend."

The children were wandering around now, somewhat less animatedly, so Vincent sat on a fake rock and announced that he would tell some stories. The children gathered around him and sat down on a fluffy white carpet that had been used to resemble snow on some float of long ago.

His storytelling held the children in thrall for over an hour, and then there was a sudden change in the music to "Santa Claus is Coming to Town" and a loud series of Ho, Ho, Ho's rang out in the room.

The children jumped up in amazement and gasped as Santa arrived with a huge brown sack over his shoulder. They crowded around him and he laughed at them, asking them if they had been good, and finally putting his sack on the floor.

He opened the bag with a great deal of ceremony, looking intently at each child, as if for evidence of misdeeds. The children were quietly fidgeting from foot to foot, their eyes shining and glued to Santa's white gloved hands.

One after another, he lifted out identical small wrapped packages and handed them out. When opened - which was very quickly - the children found Beatrix Potter books, each with it's beautiful illustration on the cover.

Catherine had not been able to resist them when she found the whole set in a second hand store, and had wrapped each one with a sigh of memory for her lost childhood. Vincent, watching her, had felt a new emotion along their bond. He had not been able to take his eyes off her face. She seemed more beautiful than ever to him and he had not disturbed her until she was finished.

"I remember these from when I was a child," she told him at last, guessing his puzzlement. "They were magical to me. Animals in waistcoats and beautiful stories that made me smile in my dreams."

The children smiled too and looked like they were prepared to read them then and there. Santa however, spoke at last, in a deep voice, somewhat like William's.

"Children, I know you want to read these now, but it's time to return home and get ready for your Yule celebration. There are more gifts waiting for you, and lots more goodies," he reminded them.

There were a few groans, but the children were soon chattering happily and running back down the stairs to the waiting tractor and its string of flatcars.

The ride home was a merry one, with everyone singing songs. Some children were laughing about what they had seen and done in Toyland, while other were taking peeks at their books.

The tractor took them as close as it could to the long stairway to the Great Hall and the adults took the smaller children by the hand and helped them down the long stairs and through the big doors.

The chandeliers were all lit and the smells of wonderful food greeted the returned travellers. Father was waiting near the tree and as soon as everyone was inside the Hall, and the doors were closed, he rang a large hand bell and announced that he had some gifts to hand out. Everyone got one hand-made gift from someone who had drawn their name. In addition, the children each received a scarf, a project by the tunnel knitters - men and women - over several months. The colours had everyone laughing because they were made from a crazy assortment of scrap yarns in a variety of stitches and patterns. No two were alike - but all were beautiful.

After that, everyone moved to the tables and the great Yule dinner got underway. Platters of turkey, stuffing, potatoes, peas, squash and cranberry sauce were passed around and around, refilled and passed around again. After that, small dishes of chocolate mouse were passed down from a nearby table, along with some small vanilla wafers. Then the teapots were passed around at last, and cups filled.

Everyone had a sense of having eaten to capacity, but praise was heaped on William, who sat at the foot of the table beaming.

“There’ll be more to eat and drink-- later,” he remarked, patting his ample stomach. The community groaned with one voice and swore they would not eat another bite until the next day. No one was fooled, least of all William. There would be hours of dancing and songs - guaranteed to garner some appetite for snacks.

And so it was. The hall rang with merriment until the children started to fall asleep and even the adults were beginning to yawn. The wonderful Yule celebration was drawing to a close.

There were many hands to pack up the leftover food and help haul it back to William’s larder, while others cleaned and moved all the tables and chairs back into their storage nooks.

The tree and other decorations were left and would be dismantled on Boxing Day - a task that fell to the teenagers, and one they enjoyed because they always found something of interest forgotten - or perhaps left deliberately. William made sure they had plenty of snacks and drink to give them energy.

Thus, the community settled down for its Yule rest. Vincent and Catherine returned to their brownstone, hand in hand. They were no less tired than anyone else, but would lounge in front of their fireplace, letting the day’s excitement drain away, until they were ready for bed.

The quiet in the tunnels was intense, since the pipes too were silent. Not even Mouse was abroad. He was exhausted and happily snuggled into the soft embrace of a huge, red plush cushion he had found inside a box in the storeroom. Perhaps it had once provided sleigh seat padding to a long-ago Santa. Mouse was happy and for once, knew that he would be remembered for this Yule - the year the parade came to the tunnels.

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