

Some Yuletide Fun

by Angie



*In winter's tedious
nights sit by the fire*
- William Shakespeare,
Richard II

Yule was a time for family and relaxation in the tunnels. Catherine couldn't quite bring herself to forget the gift-giving that obsessed the world above at this time, but wanted to give something unique, especially to Vincent - something they could enjoy, in the privacy of their brownstone. But what to get?

Jenny called her up one day and invited her for lunch. Catherine asked her for some ideas. Jenny was silent and then giggled.

"I have an idea," she said. "We'll do lunch and I'll show you the perfect gift for that big, gorgeous, hairy man of yours."



Catherine gave a mental shrug as they signed off, then made herself ready to join Jenny downtown in their favourite restaurant. She needed inspiration and Jenny often had good ideas.

When they finished lunch, Jenny took Catherine's arm and led her to a new boutique not far from her publishing office. Catherine stood outside with her friend, and smiled when she saw the name. However, bathroom accessories were not quite what she had in mind.

"Come in. You'll see."



So Catherine followed her into the place, which had the usual sparse but tastefully upmarket selection of towels, soaps, brushes and such. She was about to say something mildly disparaging when Jenny, seeing the look on her face, grasped her arm for attention.

“Not here. Back there,” Jenny admonished. She pointed at a large partition which divided the shop.

So they strolled past the partition and Jenny waited for the reaction. She wasn't disappointed. Catherine's jaw dropped. Bathtubs! Who would have thought?

There were two different ones, but there was no doubt in Jenny's mind which one her friend would want.



Mentally, Catherine made some calculations and guessed it might work, although the novelty was more the point than its utility. It would certainly surprise Vincent.

“Well?” Jenny asked.

“Well, I love it, but where on earth would we put it? We have a lovely jacuzzi in our ensuite, as you know. I don't want to give that up - not even for this.”

She was being facetious, and Jenny smiled. Catherine knew she would have to buy it. But it did have to be put somewhere. Maybe in their basement. That way if anyone wanted to use it for its intended purpose, the plumbing could be installed easily. The small storage room off the laundry room might work. It would be warm and whatever was in there now could be moved.

A nice curtain around it, a nice rug under it, and it would give them a little privacy and some fun. Vincent hardly ever went in there, so if she could get it delivered when he was busy below, she could keep it a secret until Yuletide. She could even lock the door. Yes, that would be best. He would understand if she said it was a surprise.

“Ok, I think I have an idea. Let's do it!”

Jenny smiled broadly and they looked around for a salesperson, and seeing none, went to the cash desk. That got the attention of staff and a tall young man quickly approached them.

“Ladies, how can I help you?”

“I'd like to order one of those bathtubs. How soon could you get me one?” Catherine asked.

He looked a little nonplussed. “Um, well they usually take at least two months to deliver, but I could sell you the floor model. It's only been there for a month and is in perfect condition. I could deliver it to you within a week, if you live in the City.”

Catherine gave him her address and he nodded.

“No problem.”

“Good, then you have a sale.”

“Which one do you want?”

She told him and he returned to the tub to pull off the tag, then wrote out the sales slip, with her address and phone number. Catherine handed him her credit card.

“I’ll call you when I can give you a time and day for delivery,” he told her.

“That will be fine. Thank goodness they’re light. It will have to go up a few stairs to our front door, and then down a few into our basement.”

“That will be no problem,” the salesman told her. “I can recommend a plumber, if you wish.”

“No need. I have someone I use regularly,” she told him.

“Then thank you ... Mrs. Wells. You should be hearing from me in a day or two.”

“Thanks,” she replied and she and Jenny left.

“Do you have any more ideas like that?” Catherine asked.

“What more do you want?” Jenny asked.

“I need a dessert recipe. I want to make something for Yule. It’s become tradition. I like to help out.”

“I can think of a cake recipe that my Norwegian paternal grandmother passed down to us. It’s delicious, easy to make, and can feed quite a few people.”

“Sounds terrific. What’s it called?”

“I just call it Norway Currant Cake. If it had a name, no one told me. It was always made for company, but I never tired of it. Come to think of it, I haven’t had it in years, so I’ll give you the recipe on the condition that you allow me to have a piece.”

“I think I can promise that, as long as you don’t want a large one. Or should I make two cakes?”

“It’ll be popular, so if you want to make two, I’ll come along with the recipe and help you. You’ll need a bundt pan, two if you’re making double. I can bring one.”

“That sounds wonderful, Jenny! You’re on! Do I need any special ingredients?”

“Just the currants.”

“Fine. I’ll have them on hand.”

Catherine returned home, after leaving Jenny at her office. They promised to get together the day before Yule to make the cakes.

The next day the bath shop phoned and told Catherine that the tub could be delivered in two days, between 2 and 4 pm, if that was convenient. Catherine knew that Vincent would be teaching classes below at that time, so she confirmed the delivery.

Vincent, meanwhile, was reading to the children.

He had found an ancient collection of Mother Goose rhymes and was reading his favourite. This time of year always made him think of fireplaces and what was burned in them. He had found an old favourite Mother Goose rhyme, and decided it fit the definition of instruction as well.



The tunnel community found its wood where it could, sometimes in furniture too old to be good for anything else, sometimes in storm wrack in Central Park. Mouse, who wandered more than most, both above and below, was best at finding more firewood when it was needed. Even here, so far below the surface, the cold winds howled down the stairways and tunnels, as if to urge everyone to sit before a fire. And it was important to know the qualities of the wood they burned.

“Making the Fire

*Oak-logs will warm you well,
That are old and dry;
Logs of pine will sweetly smell
But the sparks will fly.
Birch-logs will burn too fast,
Chestnut scarce at all;
Hawthorn-logs are good to last -
Catch them in the fall.
Holly-logs will burn like wax,
You may burn them green;
Elm-logs like to smoldering flax,
No flame to be seen.
Beech-logs for winter time,
Yew-logs as well;
Green elder-logs it is a crime
For any man to sell.
Pear-logs and apple-logs,*



*They will scent your room,
Cherry-logs across the dogs
Smell like flower of the broom.
Ash-logs, smooth and grey,
Burn them green or old,
Buy up all that come your way -
Worth their weight in gold."*

(In the Green Wood from Mother Goose)

The children listened intently. Then he remembered something else from his nursery rhyme days. "I have a riddle for you," he told them, and they all immediately looked alert, expectant,

*"Long legs, crooked thighs,
Little head and no eyes.
What am I?" ***

The children looked at each other, but no one ventured a guess. He considered giving them a hint, then reflected that the poem he had just read should be suggestion enough.

"Then, think about it until tomorrow's lesson," he told them, despite the groans from several of his pupils and a loud "No!" from Samantha. They all filed out, chattering ideas and arguing about the merits of them.

Vincent turned his thoughts to Catherine. He knew she had gone out with Jenny the day before, and although he had not sensed anything momentous, he had noticed that she seemed unusually satisfied with something. He wondered if she had found his Yule gift. He knew she liked to surprise him every year, and he enjoyed the anticipation. Catherine never chose the ordinary - socks, or a book, or a CD. No, she delighted in giving him something he would never have dreamed of.

For his part, he had visited the Crystal Cavern again and picked a selection of small crystals, all of different colours, one for every month of the year. He had asked Mouse if he could make a bracelet with them, and had been told it would be "easy".



Vincent wondered if Mouse ever really found anything difficult. Challenges did emerge occasionally, but he always found a way to conquer them, often one that no one else could have found.

Vincent knew that their intrepid scavenger had saved a gold plate or two from the sunken ship. He knew Mouse had started to deconstruct it and Arthur had been drinking from a gold cup. Vincent had overlooked the issue, and said nothing to Father, knowing full well that anything Mouse did with the items would not be for himself - and he would give freely of his time and talents.

He returned home and found Catherine tidying up her office. He gathered her to him as she threw some paper into the wastebasket, and she turned towards him, smiling into his eyes.

“Just finishing my New Year’s cleanup early,” she reported.

“And what is next?” he asked.

Her smile widened.

“I’d love to just sit in front of the fire and have you read to me, maybe with a little music in the background,” she suggested.

“Ah ..

*‘Is there a moment quite as keen
Or memory as bright
As light and fire and music (sweet)
To warm the winter’s night?’”*

(From The Tree of Songs)

“Exactly. A good starting place, I think.”

“Ah, and the anticipation is everything, Vincent.”

“Yes,” he sighed. “And now we must anticipate some lunch.”

“That’s fine. Cleaning up, even an office, always gives me an appetite.”

They went down to lunch and enjoyed a leisurely but noisy lunch. The children were already anticipating Yule.

“Are you ready for some fireplace relaxation?”

“Indeed I am. Let us go hither.”

The afternoon and evening were indeed relaxing, at least some of the time. Sleep came as it usually did, and outside, the snow was falling.



The next day, Catherine busied herself in the kitchen all morning, and made herself a lunch, so as to be handy for the delivery. She made some sugar cookies, and sprinkled them with a festive mixture of coloured sugars left over from years past.



Vincent had appeared just long enough to taste one of the cookies, then left her to her work and returned below for lunch. He would be busy in classes, so she hoped the delivery wasn't late.

She had just finished cleaning up when the doorbell rang. She rushed out and opened the door to let in the two men. The tub, fortunately, was light, so they had no problems getting it up the stairs and down into the basement room, which she had managed to clear out and even carpet with a nice old Turkish rug she had been storing. She thanked the men and stood back to look at her purchase. It would surely give Vincent a chuckle.

It just needed another small touch. She moved a three panel rattan screen into place to block the view from the door and draped a deep red velvet curtain over it. Then she shut and locked the door.

Two days later, Jenny and Catherine were busily making the Norway Currant Cake. Catherine was surprised how easy the recipe was and both smiled as the two bundt pans were put in the oven to bake. Cleaning up was not difficult, so they were done quickly and sat in the kitchen chatting and waiting for the cakes. An hour later, just as the recipe said, they took the cakes out.

"Beautiful," was Catherine's amazed reaction. "And they smell wonderful too."



“Yes, this one seems to be foolproof. And so light. Can we try a piece? “

Catherine considered. Vincent would want to try some too, so it was just as well they had made two cakes.

“Why not?” she responded. She was dying to try some herself. She was not disappointed and closed her eyes in delight as she ate some. Those Norwegians knew a thing or two, she decided.

Vincent did indeed happily sample the cake when he returned. Jenny had left by that time and Catherine was enveloped in a hug that left her breathless.

“I think my love as rare, ” Vincent misquoted.

“And I love your goodly gifts,” Catherine sighed, reflecting that Shakespear - again - did indeed know everything.

“Which will never be taken away,” he told her, giving her a deep kiss

When Yule arrived, Catherine was almost as eager as the children. She and Vincent rose early and went below to help prepare the dining chamber for the day’s festivities. Breakfast was a buffet, and the children hung their miles of paper chains everywhere they could find make their masking tape stick.

William had lit the big stone fireplace, and the room had become very cosy and warm. Vincent sighed as he smelled the wonderful smell of burning wood - some kind of pine, he guess, and wondered if it sparked too, as the poem said.



“*She has made me in love with a cold climate, and frost and snow, with a northern moonlight,*” Vincent whispered.

“We must go into the Park tonight, Vincent, to see if there’s snow and moonlight.”

“Yes.”

As soon as everyone had eaten, Father stood up and from a bag at his feet, began to hand out small gifts for the children. They each received a small knit bag, bulging with wrapped hard candy and a mandarin orange.

Afterwards, over the noise of happy children, he gestured for silence. When it had finally been achieved, he announced, “Now, my friends, today is yours. Enjoy the peace of the season with your friends and family. This hall will be always warm and there will be a modest buffet for all meals.”

After giving Father a hug and kiss, Vincent and Catherine returned to the brownstone and lit the fire in their den.

Vincent waited until Catherine was comfortably seated, then reached into a pocket and drew out a small cloth bag. She opened it and carefully held the bracelet Mouse had made from his crystal collecting.

It was simple, Catherine reflected - and probably something she would not have given a second glance to in her previous life. But she knew that the stones had been gathered with love, and the bracelet made with care - probably by Mouse. She loved it's rough look - somehow it seemed appropriate.



Catherine smiled. "Vincent it's beautiful. So many colours! I never knew quartz came in so many."

She gave him a kiss and then gave him a lopsided grin.

"I have a surprise for you, but you'll have to come downstairs."

Vincent was now intrigued. Catherine led him downstairs, then unlocked the room in the basement. She led him around the room divider and Vincent peered at what it hid, as she stepped aside. His brow furrowed. It was obviously a bathtub, but of a type he had never seen before. He was at a loss for words. He noticed it had no plumbing attached. He looked at Catherine, his curiosity and puzzlement plain on his face.

Catherine chuckled. "I can have it attached to the plumbing, but there wasn't time before Yule. But really, what I want is to see you in it, Vincent."

She closed the door and waited. "Now," she whispered. "And without any clothes, please."

Vincent considered only a moment and then began to remove his clothing, stacking it neatly on a rattan couch that nestled against the deep red curtains draped over the old brick walls. He raised his eyebrows at her.

"I hope you are going to follow my example, Catherine."

"Oh, I will, Vincent." She began to undress as well, then paused as she reached her underthings.

"You don't need to wait for me," she said huskily, gazing at the beautiful form before her.

Vincent shrugged, and stepped into the tub. It soon became obvious that it would be a challenge for him to use in the usual way.

“Catherine, I think it’s a little snug,” he remarked, looking at her, his mouth twitching in humour.



Catherine quickly finished undressing. “Oh, I don’t know, Vincent. I think it’s just perfect for keeping you where I want you.”



To that, Vincent had no logical response - and was soon too busy to think of one.

“Happy Yuletide, Vincent,” Catherine whispered in one of his delightful ears.”

“And to you, my love,” he whispered back.

END

*(*Answer to riddle: A pair of fire tongs)*