

Joys of the Season

by Angie

Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much.
- Helen Keller

Vincent stood at the culvert and regarded the first snow of the winter, glittering in the glow of distant light. He followed a snowflake as it fell, briefly trapped in silhouette against the city glow, every crystal facet visible ... until it met the ground and was lost with all the others. He did this several times, fascinated as always by the variety of beautiful symmetry of them.

Every year, he tried to catch the first snowfall in New York. It often seemed to do so at night. Here in the Park, the pathways would be swiftly covered and remain free of footprints and people, pristine and pure, at least for a short while.

He took a deep breath of the cold air that smelled of snow, of the frigid upper reaches of the atmosphere where no human being existed. It gave him pleasure to think that there was still somewhere, besides the very deepest depths of the ocean – or the unexplored riven stone of his tunnel world - which paid no heed to man.

The world above was heralding Christmas. Even he could not escape the endlessly repeated dozen or so traditional tunes. He was numb to their message now, which had begun immediately following Halloween. But then, they were not aimed at himself or the tunnel community, or the poor who filled the tenements of New York - only those with money to spend. He could not find the spirit within him to embrace it in that fashion, much preferring the more modest event they celebrated below.

Catherine, he knew, felt much the same. She attended festive gatherings, bought gifts for special people above, but only relaxed when she was him, preferably below, where people did not need to prove their regard for each other with expensive gifts.

How had it happened, he wondered, that the joys of the season had become so corrupted? He understood the desire to please children, for their joy made the homey celebration below a wonderful day for adults too. Adults prepared little hand-made gifts or treats and everyone got something. They were often humorous, sometimes, practical, but always from the heart.

The season was hard on those above who had to survive the constant barrage, and although he and others tried to ensure that their helpers had enough to eat and a small gift, there were so many others who had nothing to celebrate. For those, Mary and all the folk below who could knit or crochet, were making hats, mitts, scarves, and small stuffed toys, that might give a little joy to the men, women and children who could be found in doorways and on the streets. Catherine and a few others would deliver their gifts to food kitchens and help to hand them out. For those who declined to visit such places, they would also patrol the streets. The tunnel children always knew where to find them.

And now it was snowing, a further challenge to people without shelter or warmth. The homeless shelters would try to fit in as many as they could, but there were always people left outside. To those, there were many groups who provided winter clothing and blankets. Yet every winter, some died of cold. Vincent remembered Kristopher, who he understood had died that way, despite being a talented artist. How much other talent was buried in poverty on

the streets? It was perhaps fortunate that they did not all become haunts. Kristopher, at least, was not malicious, merely annoying.

"Oh thank you for that kind thought," a voice said behind him.

Vincent didn't turn around. "I wish you would not read my mind, Kristopher," he retorted tartly. "Eavesdroppers seldom hear good of themselves."

"But they should always listen to matters which concern them," Kristopher responded. "Think how dull old Hamlet would have been without them."

Vincent chuckled and turned around. There was their intractable ghost, wearing totally inappropriate clothing for the season and the ubiquitous baseball cap ... and a smile that no one could fail to respond to.

"As CS Lewis said, '*Spying on people by magic is the same as spying on them in any other way.*'" Vincent replied. "To what do I owe this honour?" he asked, suspecting the ghost's appearance was not an accident.

"'Tis the season," Kristopher said, suddenly turning serious. "I found something I think you should see. Only you."

Vincent sighed. "Lead on," he said, and followed the ghost as he walked along the snowy culvert and into the Park. He looked back, a little worried, but the snow was falling more heavily, so his footprints would not show for long.

Kristopher moved quickly, so quickly that Vincent had to hurry to keep up. They had almost traversed the park when Kristopher suddenly turned and dived between a dense strand of trees. They were in an area known as The Loch, he guessed, dense with trees and an area even he trod carefully, because it was dark and often dangerous, in the sense of being a hangout for men of bad intent. Mentally, automatically, he calculated the distance to the nearest tunnel entry.

Then suddenly, Kristopher stopped and Vincent, unprepared, almost walked through him. The ghost pointed to a deadfall of roots, branches and old leaves, mostly protected from the snow. Something white was just visible at the bottom and Vincent moved to look closer. The thing quivered and Vincent had to get very close to see what was looking back at him.

It was a raccoon, a white one, probably albino, Vincent guessed. He tentatively reached out to the creature and it quivered again, but did not move.

"What?" Vincent asked Kristopher, who was still close by, silent.

"As you see, Vincent. It is a very young cub, an orphan. Dogs got its mother, I think. She's behind the deadfall. Dead. This creature is too young to survive long here – although the snow will perhaps keep it invisible. I thought, since you once had one of its kind in the tunnels, you might adopt it."

Vincent said nothing to this, merely crouched down and tentatively reached for the cub. It whimpered quietly, but did not attempt to bite, so Vincent carefully got both his hands around it and stood up with it.

It was truly remarkable. He had read that such happened, although he had never seen one himself. There were large numbers of raccoons in the park. After all Mouse had found one, so it was inevitable there would be an albino once in a while.

The creature seemed magical in the falling snow, in a winter barely begun. There was the merest hint of a mask on its tiny face and very faint rings on its tail, he realized as he held it to what light there was from a distant park lamp.

It was, Vincent had to admit, using one of Catherine's favourite adjectives, "adorable." It snuggled into his hands and against his body. It was very young.



"How did you find it?" Vincent looked up to ask Kristopher, but the ghost had disappeared.

Vincent sighed and moved quickly to the nearest entry, one beneath a stone bridge, and carefully carried the little creature back to his chamber. He found a rattan carrier he'd kept, for those times when Arthur needed to be captured and kept under control. It had sat in the corner of his chamber, unremarked, for many years. Vincent found an old towel scrap he used to dust and lined the carrier with it. It was not overly-confining. The cub snuggled into the space happily and went to sleep. Vincent closed the door and fastened it, just in case, then went to find something to feed it. A baby bottle and milk would be the best first test. He wasn't sure the creature was weaned, it was so small.

Geoffrey asked no questions, when roused from reading in his chamber, just gave Vincent a small bottle with room temperature milk. He also supplied a small leftover beef patty when asked for a little meat, also without comment. Vincent, left with a sincere thank-you. The cook merely nodded and returned to his chamber.

Back in his chamber, the raccoon had opened its eyes, but had not moved. Vincent carefully lifted it out of the carrier and held it to try the bottle. It soon discovered how to suck the nipple and did so until the bottle was half empty. Vincent gave it a small piece of meat, and it nibbled that. So the cub was not completely weaned, but had been eating some solids. That was good.

Vincent put the raccoon back in the carrier and it immediately curled up and went to sleep again. He moved it to his table so he could watch it more easily. It was late, so he didn't see any point in informing anyone else until morning. With a sigh, he got himself ready for bed and was soon asleep.

In the morning, the rattle of the rattan carrier awakened him and he rushed to it. The raccoon trying to dig into the blankets. Cursing himself for not thinking of the obvious, Vincent removed the cub and put it in a bucket of sand he kept close to the brazier for safety reasons. The creature quickly defecated into it then covered the result up. That would have to be taken care of, Vincent thought wryly. Arthur had found sand pits in the tunnels, and Mouse had marked the stone walls so that the children knew to avoid playing in them.

What was he going to do with the creature? He could not keep it in a carrier for the rest of its life, and he had no time for a pet. But in the meantime, he had to feed it. He gave it the bottle again, which it finished, and then ate more of the meat Vincent gave it. Back in its carrier, it again went to sleep. Vincent suspected it had not eaten well for a time. He had not thought to ask how long it had been orphaned – if Kristopher even knew.

With a shrug of resignation, Vincent washed and dressed and went to the dining chamber for

breakfast. He was reluctant to announce his find, but did consider that Mouse might be his best source of information, and asked the tinker to come to his chamber after breakfast.

He did so quickly, curiosity being one of Mouse's most obvious character traits. He immediately saw the carrier and his face lit up when he saw what was in it.

"Did Vincent find that? All white!"

"Yes, Mouse, it's an albino raccoon. I found it in the park, orphaned."

"Like Arthur, but not the same. What is his name?"

That took Vincent aback. He took out the sleepy cub and examined it more closely. He was reasonably sure it was female.

"I haven't given it a name, Mouse. And I believe it's a girl."

"Maybe a sister of Arthur's, Vincent? Mouse can take care of it."

Vincent considered that. Yes, it was by far the best solution. Mouse had loved Arthur, who had died of very old age some years previously. Mouse had been very sad, but had not tried to find a replacement. He would surely love this cub.

"Are you sure you want to take care of another of these creatures?" he asked, sure the question was apocryphal.

"Yes, Mouse good with raccoons. Can feed and take to potty, train to be quiet, not get into trouble."

That last, Vincent knew, was probably impossible, just as it had proven with Arthur. However, Mouse's chamber was a raccoon's heaven and there was plenty to keep the creature occupied.

"It does need a name," Vincent commented quietly.

"Snow White," Mouse said immediately, and Vincent smiled. He was sure it would be shortened, sooner or later, but it was an appropriate name.

"Very good," Vincent told him. He gave Mouse the bottle and the tinker happily carried away the cub in its carrier. It was sleeping again.

Over the next few days, Vincent had little time to think about the rescued raccoon, as one crisis after another hit the tunnels and there was a rush to get them fixed before the Yuletide. Fortunately, they didn't need anything special from the world above, so the repair of broken pipes and the minor collapse of a tunnel did not need Mouse to 'find' anything.

When Vincent did remember, he dropped into Mouse's chamber to see what had evolved there. He found Mouse at his workbench and Snow White playing with a rubber ball and a small stuffed cube in a large, cushioned dog bed. The cub was growling mildly as she batted the ball around.

"Has she been any trouble?" Vincent asked, curious.

"Likes to play, then sleep, then eat, then poop, then more play," Mouse replied. "If plays a lot, will sleep more."

"And the poop?" Vincent inquired.

"Showed Snow White the sand pit. No problem."

Vincent nodded and said good-bye, deciding he'd better take care of that item in his own chamber. He mused that he had heard no proclamation over the pipes from Fa then he

caught himself. Father had gone to his reward over a year ago – but his adopted son managed to forget this fact on occasion, even although he was the nominal head of the tunnel community now.

Nominal ... there was a word, he thought ruefully. He WAS the leader, he knew that, but rarely made that position obvious by decision or fiat. Without Father to weigh in, sometimes to the detriment of peace, the tunnels seemed to be much more complacent. Work got done to the schedules Vincent drew up with the help of Kanin – schedules that told everyone their place in their community and changed little, except when emergencies happened. The children were still cared for by Mary and her apprentices; food was cooked by Geoffrey, who had become an accomplished cook under William's guidance and was training his own set of apprentices; and the usual everyday routines of cleaning, washing, bathing and garbage collection were meted out to teams. In fact, there was little to complain about. Now with the season of peace upon them, everyone was willingly doing what was necessary, and taking time to do what they needed to do for the upcoming Yuletide.

Vincent had heard a declaration from Mouse about Snow White's nap times. So the children, he guessed, had visited Mouse quietly. They had mentioned the 'baby' to him, so perhaps that accounted for the unusual care. Geoffrey was probably supplying food, but that would not be a hardship, since raccoons seemed to eat almost anything.

Vincent concentrated on his chamber, which needed some cleaning and tidying done in preparation for a visit from Catherine. He picked up the bucket, carried it to the official poop sandpit and emptied it. The pit was well away from the home tunnels and accessible only by something as small as a raccoon. The waste would dry out and disintegrate naturally. Vincent went down to the falls where the sandy shoreline provided him with replacement sand, and carried it back to his chamber.

Then he looked around his chamber, uncertain where to start. He found himself immobile, unable to decide ... and sat down in his chair to think. Too many people were gone now, too many people he had cared deeply about.

He was still brooding, when a soft hand touched his head from behind. Catherine! She moved around him and positioned herself on a chair beside him.

"What is it, Vincent? I felt your sadness."

"I don't know, Catherine. I just cannot find the energy to do anything."

"I believe I know what's bothering you, Vincent. It's the season of joy, but you feel saddened by everyone who is no longer able to share this time with us."

"Yes," he agreed. "But what do I do about it?"

"I have an idea, one I read about in the newspaper some years ago, organized by a hospice society. I think we should include a "Blue Yule" as part of our celebration, to recognize our sadness and help us deal with it."

Vincent looked at her, interested, and nodded.

"I think we would all appreciate that," he commented. "I'll mention it at the next council meeting tomorrow and take suggestions."

She smiled at him.

"It's all right to feel sad at this time of year, Vincent. Many people do. And I have an idea."

She went to get her carry bag, left at the chamber door and extracted a folder. She showed him some sheets of paper with an image on them.

"I photocopied this and thought the children might like to decorate some for the tree – but they'll work for another idea I have now for our Blue Yule. I'll take care of it, Vincent. This will be my project."

Vincent nodded and felt much better. Catherine left him to get her plans underway, and he worked to tidy up his chamber. He put all the books he had read, or might not read, in a pile to return to Fa ... 'The Library Chamber', he reminded himself with a sigh.

Meanwhile, Catherine approached Cullen and got that part of her plan underway. It was going to work, she thought. She was just providing a special decoration. Vincent would organize a small ceremony.

Music! She thought of a couple of pieces that would work well in the ceremony and made a note to herself to find the recordings she could bring down to the tunnels in a boom box. Yes, that would be a nice touch, she decided.

Catherine sat in on the council meeting the following day and was gratified to see that everyone was interested in the idea of a Blue Yule. She looked at Annabelle, their diminutive tunnel seamstress. She was often the one consulted on anything artistic, or garment related. Annabelle caught her eye and motioned with her head. Catherine nodded in response. Well, something was in that busy brain, for sure, she decided.

With the plans seemingly well advanced and Yule not far away, everyone was getting excited and the children were planning something of their own ... probably with Mouse. They were not good at dissembling – but everyone pretended not to have noticed the verbal slip-ups that gave them away.

After the meeting, Catherine made her way to Annabelle's workshop, and found the dwarf in the corner where a trio of beat up old chests of drawers held a lot of sewing notions. On top of it was a ceramic tree.

Catherine chuckled when she saw it, and Annabelle turned to her. "Catherine! What's so funny?"

"That tree," she replied. Annabelle looked puzzled.

"There was a fad many years ago," she explained. "People bought special kits – sheep, heads, dogs ... then embedded them with chia seeds. When you put water in them, they sprouted. That tree was one of them. I can tell by the opening on the top. There was supposed to be a star inserted after the watering, to cover the hole."



Annabelle chuckled. "You topsiders come up with the strangest things. Well, as it happens, I have an idea for it, that would add a little something to your Blue Yule. We just need to pull out the raw materials from these drawers."

"Tell me what you want," Catherine asked, and Annabelle did. An hour later, they had the materials laid out.

"We'll need to use your workroom because we'll need a glue gun," Annabelle remarked.

"We can go now, if you wish," Catherine told her, so they bundled up the materials, and the ceramic tree, into a box and made their way to the brownstone's basement, where a workroom was available for anyone who needed it. It had a modest selection of tools, but most importantly, it had electricity.

They sat themselves at a little table and went to work on the tree. She and Annabelle discussed their options, then Catherine searched out the materials and handed them over. She was more than glad to let the dwarf do the work. She hated glue guns! She was prone to burn herself and they seemed to blob more often than glue.

However, with the expertise of Annabelle, it didn't take long, as the tree was small. Catherine was amazed at how beautiful something so simple could be – and it would be perfect for the Blue Yule. She hadn't considered it when she made the suggestion, but a tree was definitely needed. And this one could remain on display all year, perhaps as a kind of memorial to the loved and lost somewhere.

They cleaned up and Annabelle put the unused materials back into the shoebox and regarded the tree.

"Can you hide it somewhere until Yule?" she asked. "My work chamber is too public, and I think this should be a surprise. Besides, it was your idea. Bring it down with anything else you have and it can all go on display together."

"Absolutely," Catherine exclaimed. Annabelle left to return to the tunnels, and Catherine decided she had better give some thought to dinner for she and Vincent.

Over the next few days, Catherine completed her own Yule contributions and eagerly awaited the big day. She found herself in demand for decorating, preparing tins of cookies, and even helping with the baking. It was supposed to be a less demanding event than Winterfest, but she was amazed at what was being done. At least it was all in the dining hall. No traipsing up and down that windy stairway to the Great Hall – or even the smaller, darker one from the kitchen. It was a long walk either way. The dining hall would be cosier by far.

Vincent had decided that perhaps the Blue Yule ceremony should be done first, so that the sombre moment would get everyone's attention and make what followed that much more appreciated.

When the Yule day arrived, Catherine had put the little tree on a nearby table



Then she arranged the boom box and the music CDs she had chosen nearby, ready to play on a signal from Vincent. They had agreed on several, but decided two would be enough for the purposes of the ceremony. He decided to read excerpts from a number of sources, to honour those who had left them. Then he would complete the ceremony by reading out a list of those who had passed on.

When everyone was gathered, he nodded at Catherine, and she put on a CD. The mellow tones of Elvis Presley wafted softly from behind him as he spoke.

*"I'll have a blue Christmas without you
I'll be so blue just thinking about you
Decorations of red on a green Christmas tree
Wont be the same dear, if you're not here with me"*
(words & music by billy hayes - jay johnson)

When it was finished, Catherine switched the CD to John McDermott's *"The Old Man"*
Vincent recited the words when the song reached his chosen excerpt.

*"The tears have all been shed now
We've said our last good-byes
His soul's been blessed and he's laid to rest
And it's now I feel alone
He was more than just a father
A teacher my best friend
He can still be heard in the tunes we shared
When we play them on our own
I never will forget him for he made me what I am
Though he may be gone memory lingers on
And I miss him ... The old man."*
(The Old Man - John McDermott)

Vincent took a moment to collect himself and let his audience reflect, then continued.

"We have lost many of our family over the years, but they are never completely gone from us, for we will never forget them. They are part of our history.

"Life is a gift, as I know well. Were it not for the people who created our community, and found me and gave me a home - and continue to do so - I would not be alive.

"Robert Falcon Scott said, '*Each man in his way is a treasure*', and so it is."

Vincent paused and looked around at the sombre faces of the folk before him. There were no dry eyes and he could hear muffled sobs.

Then he read the names of those who had departed their world for the hereafter.

"Narcissa, Sebastian, William, Dr. Peter Alcott, Dr Jacob Wells, Ellie ..."

The list was fairly long. When he was finished, Vincent paused again and waited, giving everyone a moment of silence to reflect.

"Finally, my friends and family, although we remember all those who cannot be with us today, as long as we keep them in our hearts, they are never really gone.

"As Quintus Ennius said around 200 BC, '*Let no one weep for me, or celebrate my funeral with mourning; for I still live, as I pass to and fro through the mouths of men*'.

"Here in our community, we now remember each one of those we celebrate with this Blue Yule. Every one of them gave of themselves to our world. As Walt Whitman said, "*Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged/ Missing me one place, search another/ I stop somewhere waiting for you.*"

"Thank you for your attendance. May we all enjoy this Yule with happy hearts, knowing that none of those I named would wish us to be sad on this day, of all days."

There was a respectful pause, then one of the children spoke up, somewhat plaintively, "May we have our treats and presents now, Vincent?"

There was a groan at this, but everyone managed a smile as they made their way to where the tables were well-stocked with Yuletide treats. In the corner, Mouse – for it had to be he - had hung up their artificial tree from a hook in the ceiling – upside down. It was at least six feet off the ground – but had clearly been decorated by the children.

Really seeing this for the first time, Vincent chuckled. Snow White would not be wreaking any havoc on THAT tree, even if she escaped from wherever she was. He looked around and spotted Mouse. He was hanging back, away from the crowd - and that made Vincent curious.

"Mouse?" he called as he approached their tinker.

Mouse looked around at him and smiled. "Found dog leash. Mouse is teaching Snow White to behave."

Vincent looked down and followed the leash Mouse was holding to where the albino raccoon was huddled under at footstool.

"She doesn't look very happy, Mouse."

Mouse shrugged. "Can't leave her alone in the Mousehole. Not fair. Not at Yule. Vincent hold leash so I can get some food?"

Vincent sighed and took the leash, then sat down on a nearby chair. If he knew Mouse, he would not be returning quickly. In fact, he sat there so long that Catherine came looking for him, and when she saw the situation, quickly went to the tables and brought back Vincent a large plate full of goodies they could share and a mug of ale. Vincent put the leash loop

under the leg of his chair and thanked her. Snow White seemed to have fallen asleep, curled up happily against an old cushion he had not noticed. Mouse must have brought it with him.

He and Catherine ate their treats happily, discussing this and that.

“What is this cake?” he asked, noticing tardily that it was neither fruit cake nor currant cake, both of which had been the cause of concern by the council some weeks ago.

“I asked Geoffrey and he called it Blitzkuchen.”

“Ah yes, I do believe I remember it. Not an easy name to forget. It's delicious.”

“It is! I'll have to ask for the recipe. I'm sure it will be fairly easy, since that seems to be an important criteria down here. Perhaps that's what the name means.”

Vincent chuckled. “Perhaps.”

He noticed that the atmosphere in the hall was growing tense with anticipation, as the children were awaiting the appearance of Kris Kringle. They were running around, clumping in groups and finally standing near the entrance, expectantly, babbling excitedly.

Suddenly, a chorus of bells rang out and the jolly old man entered the hall with a huge bag over his shoulder, also dragging a small wagon carrying another large bag.

Vincent chuckled. Kanin had been drafted to act the role this year, and had grown a long beard. With some extra padding to the costume to give himself a more rotund profile, he was perfect.

Bedlam greeted him from all corners of the hall as the children rushed to where he stood under the tree. He called on two of the teens to help him hand out the gifts, which was done so quickly, that Vincent was amazed. The sounds of joy that greeted each gift, frugally wrapped in a patchwork towel or handkerchief, was enough to remove any lingering sadness from the earlier ceremony.

Mouse suddenly reappeared with a plate of food. He apologized.

“Had to find Geoffrey to get food for Snow White. Can have milk in the kitchen. Sorry took so long.”

Vincent smiled at him and happily handed over the leash. He and Catherine got up and seeing that most of the gift giving was over, decided to take advantage of the dance floor created in the middle of the hall. An informal ensemble of musicians were again playing festive music.

The dance floor was soon moving gently to the dancing of several couples.

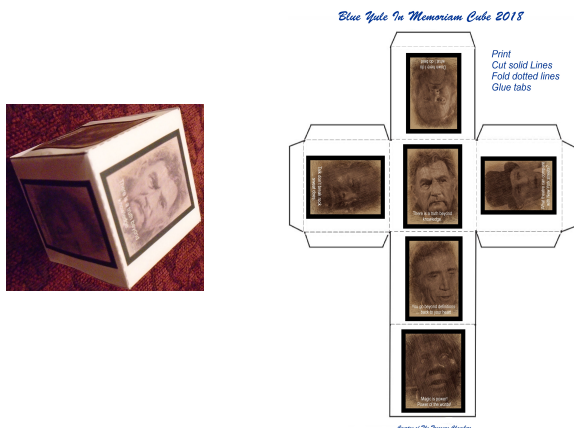
Then Catherine stopped abruptly and Vincent had to stop mid-stride to prevent himself stepping on her toes.

“I forgot my little contribution,” she exclaimed, and left him in the middle of the dance floor to run over to where the blue tree was sitting. She opened up a plastic bag and pulled out a bunch of colourful papers, then lifted out a paper cube. Vincent, by now very curious, took the cube from her and regarded it with keen interest, then nodded. Of course – it was perfect.

Catherine took her papers to the front of the hall, and Vincent followed her. Vincent took her cue and shouted “**Silence**” to the gathering and immediately everyone halted and looked in their direction. When everyone was quiet, Catherine spoke up.

“My apologies, friends. I have forgotten something created for our Yule this year. Vincent has a special cube, and here I have the printed version, which the children – or anyone – may

wish to cut out and assemble. This is a reminder of the people who made this community what it is, and who are now among our most blessed memories. And a big thank-you to Cullen who did the drawings and quotes.”



Catherine handed the papers out to anyone who approached her and received their thanks. She was gratified to see that not all of them were children. Mary looked at her copy and gave Catherine a hug.

“Thank you, dear. This was a lovely idea. I will treasure this.”

Catherine smiled and saw that a large group had gathered around the musicians and their ranks had been enlarged with a choir.

Vincent had been musing how few songs seemed to 'suit' their underground community, when there was a pause and the now expanded orchestra began a new one, joined by many children's voices.

*Jingle bell, jingle bell, jingle bell rock
Jingle bells swing and jingle bells ring
Snowin' and blowin' up bushels of fun
Now the jingle hop has begun*

*Jingle bell, jingle bell, jingle bell rock
Jingle bells chime in jingle bell time
Dancin' and prancin' in Jingle Bell Square
In the frosty air*

*What a bright time, it's the right time
To rock the night away
Jingle bell time is a swell time
To go glidin' in a one-horse sleigh*

*Giddy-up jingle horse, pick up your feet
Jingle around the clock
Mix and a-mingle in the jinglin' feet
That's the jingle bell rock*

*Jingle bell, jingle bell, jingle bell rock
Jingle bell chime in jingle bell time
Dancin' and prancin' in Jingle Bell Square*

*In the frosty air
What a bright time, it's the right time
To rock the night away
Jingle bell time is a swell time
To go glidin' in a one-horse sleigh
Giddy-up jingle horse, pick up your feet
Jingle around the clock
Mix and a-mingle in the jinglin' feet
That's the jingle bell
That's the jingle bell
That's the jingle bell rock
(Jingle Bell Rock -Bobby Helms 1957)*

Catherine giggled. "That's a very old song, Vincent. Almost as old as I am."

"Yes. It's almost as old as this community. We truly are remarkable," he commented. "It's the perfect song."

Catherine hugged him closer and they stopped dancing. She looked up at him.

"All that is in the past, thankfully. Happy New Year, Vincent."

"And to you my love. We must put the past behind us and look forward to a better New Year."

"I certainly will, Vincent," Catherine commented, before pulling him down so she could plant a kiss on his mouth."

"Mmmmm ... as will I," Vincent managed to mumble. "Shall we dance?"

"Of course," Catherine replied.

In the corner where the Christmas tree was hung from the ceiling, Kristopher stood in the shadows and smiled. He had decided not to interrupt anything, but couldn't prevent himself from watching. He thought of all the people he had known, back when he was still alive, and regarded the Blue Yule tree with no little sadness. Old Mr Smythe was now among the departed, but there was nothing to regret there. After all, his bookstore had brought Catherine and Vincent into his unlife – and seen that his paintings had been sold. Truly, he had much to be thankful for, despite being dead.

And now there was a new resident raccoon in the tunnels. It was nice to spread a little joy, he reflected. It was no more than this community deserved. They were very special.

He looked over at the dance floor and wished he had a partner, even if unseen. He felt a tap on his shoulder and looked around. Narcissa!

"Come dance with an old woman," she whispered. "I know you wish to – and even an old ghost like me can enjoy this day."

"I'm not very good," Kristopher warned her.

"Neither am I," Narcissa replied. "But what does it matter? We have no toes to be trodden on – and no one can bump into us."

She gave a deep, resonant laugh at her own joke and Kristopher chuckled. There were some puzzled looks in the direction of the tree, but neither ghost paid any attention as they joined

the dancers.

And thus they all danced the night away.

END

*When you are sorrowful,
look again in your heart,
and you shall see that in truth
you are weeping for that
which has been your delight.*

- Khalil Gibran

