

Blue Yule

By Cindy Rae



For the Yule Celebration on Treasure Chambers, 2018

As trees went, it was barely a consideration. In truth, the long, evergreen branch that had been stuck in the deep pot was little more than a trimming from a much larger tree. But in keeping with the tradition, the “Blue Yule” tree had been placed near the Mirror Pool and left there, during the winter holiday season.

The long branch, though still green and tight with needles, was a dead thing. And so it was fitting that it was placed here, where the dead (and other things) were remembered.

Vincent himself had carried the branch down, salvaging it from a Christmas tree lot off of Broome Street. The owner of the lot had sawed it off from the bottom of a huge spruce, the one side of the

tree having grown much larger than the other, thanks to its position in whatever forest it had been culled from. The bottom branches had been winnowed down, in an attempt to make the lopsided tree look more even. Symmetry sells. The owner of the lot knew it, even on Broome Street.

Sorrow, Vincent knew, was not a “symmetrical” thing, not an even thing, and certainly not a pleasing one. It was jagged and rough, and it had raw edges, most of the time. But on the other hand, sorrow was sometimes a quiet, wistful sort of feeling.

Vincent wasn't sure exactly which side of that emotion he was feeling most, this season. Sometimes it was the harder kind, and sometimes, it was the gentler one.

As he entered the chamber where the Yule tree stood, looking like a sad sort of sentry, he was struck by how “familiar” this place felt to him, even though he visited it rarely.

He knew that the deep pot which held the branch erect had been used for this purpose for as long as he could remember; that it, like sorrow, was part of a tradition. Ceramic, heavy, and chipped on one side of the rim, it could nevertheless hold both packed earth and anchoring stones, to steady its occupant, and keep it in an upright position. And so it did.

Wherever the old, tan pot had come from, whoever had made it, or brought it down, that story had been lost to time. Father only said he remembered Pascal the Elder commemorating his wife's passing on it, the first year Jacob had ever met the man. He'd never seen a holiday season here without it. It was a thing that was always placed near the Mirror Pool.

That seemed appropriate, considering that what they all used it for: The Mirror Pool was the place where loss was commemorated, and where good-byes were said.

The deep chamber was quiet, now, for unlike the ceremony of letter burning, visiting the Blue Yule tree was a quiet thing, and a personal one. Blue Yule was less a formal ceremony, and more a personal choice.

The tree would stand from roughly the week before Christmas to the week after, and whatever tokens had been placed upon it would be collected and put in a box, before the remains of the tree were sent up in the fire. This was a place to mark a passing. This was a place to say “I miss you,” to anyone who had been lost, that year. Or even farther back than that. Mr. Wong always came down to tie a Chinese symbol on it, to honor his parents. Mary tucked a needle and thread in the blue-tinged greenery, to mark the passing of the Helper who’d brought her down, years ago.

To be fair, Vincent knew that not all mementos placed upon the sturdy branches would be there to mark the death of a person. Jacob had tied a copy of the “Moonlight Sonata” to it, the year they’d lost Rolley back to the streets, and Rebecca had tied a tiny candle to it, the year her mother had chosen to return to the world Above.

Sometimes, the teenagers would come in here, marking the year their childhood was left behind, with some token or other.

Sometimes, the things that were hung there seemed to have no clear meaning. No one ever asked “who” had put “what” there, or “why.” Such things were private considerations. Not every ornament that hung on the branches was there to mark grief. Some were there to mark change, the passing away of one life, and the gathering of another.

But mostly, this was “The Goodbye Tree.” The one where those who had gone on before were commemorated, in some way, as a season otherwise devoted to merry-making and good cheer was observed.

It was a stark contrast, for such an observation, and such things seemed best done in a still, contemplative place. The Mirror Pool was perfect for that. And Blue Yule was a thing always done near the end of the year. As such, it was a time for quiet reflection, as well. Vincent had always treated it as such.

Not every tunnel resident visited the tree every year. But all of them had visited it at least once, and most had come down several times, as the years had gone by. Loss, after all, was as common as gain, in life, and this seemed to be the place to mark the former, and remember the latter.

The first year Vincent had ever hung something on the tree was the year Devin had gone missing. It had been his first real truck with grief. A tiny wooden carousel horse, a Christmas ornament that was chipping off its paint, had been the way he’d said “good-bye” to the only brother he’d ever known.

That had been a long time ago. This year’s loss was much more recent. And the pain of it felt sharper, for that.

For unlike Devin, Vincent knew that Winslow wasn’t about to return. That the big man who’d confessed he’d never found love now never would.

For whatever reason, that made this all the sadder. His good friend was gone, truly gone, and buried, miles below them all. And he’d never found for himself the thing that Vincent knew he’d found with Catherine. *I’m so sorry, my friend.* He sighed.

Vincent tied a bit of wood and twisted wire to the tree, noting that someone else had left a similar-looking ornament to mark the fall of the great man.

Perhaps Cullen came in before me, Vincent thought, tying his own attempt to fashion a pickaxe on the tree. It dangled pleasingly, and the small bit of metal caught the light from the low fire, nearby. It was a decent, if tiny, facsimile.



I miss you, Vincent thought, as he settled himself down on a nearby stone. *I miss you very much, my old friend.*

“You were the best of us. In so many ways, you were,” Vincent said aloud, as the tiny pickaxe swung gently. Warm air from the nearby fire made it turn.

“I think I would be dead right now, if it were not for you. As a matter of fact, I know I would be. And not because of Erlik, or Paracelsus. Because of... before.” Vincent shifted uncomfortably, as his memories took him a long way back. This seemed like a good place to make confessions, and share remembrances. Vincent did both.

“You knew what Mitch was before any of us did. You knew before I did. Thank you. I don’t think I ever said that. Not then. Not when I should have. You saved me. And Ike, and Rennie. But mostly me.”

He picked up a nearby stick meant for the fire, and scratched in the sand with it. The vague outline of railroad tracks took shape in the dirt. "And ... none of us wanted to speak of it. We all knew we'd be in trouble with Father, with the council, if we did. So we never did. I never did."

Memories flooded in, both from the distant past, and some from not so. Mitch Denton's voice, from only a few months ago, came back to him. *"Who held open the grate?"*

You did. You did, Mitch. Vincent answered himself, mentally. *But you didn't do it because you cared for us. You did it because you had enough sense to be afraid of Winslow.*

The stick continued to scratch in the sand. Vincent drew the letter "W." *Winslow. Winslow saved us all.*

Years rolled back, and Vincent remembered the conversation he'd overheard, between Mitch and Winslow. To this day, he wasn't sure if he was supposed to have been listening. The older boys had been sitting at a battered table, one Mitch sometimes used to play cards. Winslow's well-loved voice had been firm:

"What in hell you going down by the tracks for? Ain't nothin' but trouble, there."

"Yeah, trouble. Trouble and tools. Sometimes a boxcar gets left unlocked. Sometimes... there's stuff. Stuff worth somethin'."

"Go by yourself, then."

"Nah. Need lookouts. Come with us."

"You crazy."

"You scared?"

The sound of a chair being scraped back meant Vincent knew Mitch had overstepped. Winslow didn't like being challenged. And his temper was no better in youth than it had been in adulthood.

Winslow had two years on Mitch and almost four on Vincent. And they were important years. Of all the boys who'd grown up together, Winslow was the oldest, and "boy" was no longer really a description. He was almost seventeen to Vincent's thirteen. Years that wouldn't make so much difference, as time went on, but were like different lifetimes, then. Fifteen year-old Mitch knew he'd insulted the wrong person, because at seventeen, there was far more "man" to Winslow than boy. Adolescence had filled out his always-stocky frame. His shoulders were broad, and built for work. He'd been more slender, then, and not as strong as he would one day become, but the power in his big body was coming.

From outside the doorway, Vincent heard the uneven table leg rattle, as the black youth leaned across the table faced down the white one. Winslow got close so that there would be no mistaking him.

"What you take out of these tunnels, you bring back. In one piece and not a hair missing. Or you answer to me. You clear on that, Mitch?"

"Listen, boy, you don't give me no ..."

It was either the chair or the table that rattled, hard, and Vincent knew he was hearing the sound of Mitch being grabbed by his shirtfront, then pushed up against a wall.

"I said... are we clear?" Winslow's voice had begun to drop very low, in the last year, and at the moment, Vincent would have sworn he was hearing Winslow's father – almost.

Mitch was nervous, and the tremor in his voice gave him away. But he was Mitch Denton, and he wasn't backing down.

“D-Don’t get excited. It’s all good.”

Vincent knew Mitch was giving glare for glare. Though younger, he’d had a growth spurt early, and he was only an inch shorter than Winslow, at the time. And he was strong, for his age.

Another second passed. Two. Vincent wondered if the two of them were about to fight.

“You make sure it is,” Winslow replied, releasing Mitch and stalking away.

Vincent had fled the tunnel passageway on silent feet, before anyone had discovered he was there.

He let the memory go, then fished for another one. One that still had the power of remembered fear. They’d ventured out of a drainage grate, into the rail yard. And then, they’d been spotted.

“We were seen, Above. We... came around the corner of a boxcar, and there they were. They saw us. All of us. And we ran back,” he told the swatch of a tree. “Mitch was largest, and far ahead of us. Then there was Ike. And Rennie. Older than I was. Faster. And then... there was me.” He scratched a circular grate, in the sand.

A long-ago moment crystalized, in Vincent’s mind. He saw Mitch reach the drainage grate first, and tug it open. It’s hinge was on the top, and it swung from there, where the latch and its own weight kept it closed, normally.

“Come on! Come on!” Mitch had screamed, his acne-scarred face mottled red with fear. Ike, right behind him and nearly as tall, had slipped into the dark opening.

“Run! Run!” Mitch had shouted at Rennie and Vincent.

Rennie had been terrified, as had Vincent. He'd also been fourteen to Vincent's thirteen and a full head taller, and more nimble. His long, rangy legs had chewed up the ground, and Vincent had a moment to remember the old saw. "I don't have to outrun the bear. I just have to outrun you."

The youngest of the trio of hobos, unlike Vincent, was the fastest one. The oldest-looking one had had a bad limp, thanks to a broken foot that looked like it had never been set, properly. He lagged far behind. And the middle one seemed half-drunk on a bottle of Muscatel the three had been passing around. He ran, but with a staggering gait. His mottled face and bulbous nose looked mean. Drunken mean. But the youngest one...

The youngest one had been gaining on them, hurling cuss words and promises of death. He had hate in his eyes. And he'd been swinging a scarred Louisville slugger.

"Freak! Gonna put your brains in left field, Freak!" he'd screamed. Vincent knew the man had been yelling at him. "Got something for all you boys! Yes I do!"

Just as Rennie only had to beat Vincent, to survive, Vincent knew he only had to beat the youngest of the three tramps. The only problem with that equation was, he was losing, and he knew it.

The chase became a math problem, in the terrified boy's mind. Would he reach the grate before the tramp reached him? Would he make it in time? Rennie surely would. But Vincent, who'd temporarily been immobilized by fear at being discovered, wasn't so certain.

"Gonna get you! Gonna beat you to death!" the young hobo threatened. "Then carve you up!" the lame one shouted, pulling out a boning knife from a sheath around his waist.

Vincent remembered the moment with crystalline clarity, and how even as he'd already thought he was running as fast as he could, he seemed to run fractionally faster. Adrenaline was coursing through his system, as he willed his legs to pump faster. In front of him, Rennie made the grate. Ike was standing to one side, screaming "Run! Run!" as he pulled Rennie in. Mitch was holding up the framework of steel bars. And they were heavy.

Vincent leaped over a shattered railroad tie half-buried in the gravel. His side had a stitch and his chest burned. He knew if he was caught, he'd be killed. There simply wasn't a question. He could feel the fastest one of the hobos getting closer...

And in that moment, Vincent knew that something passed between him and Mitch. And that for Vincent, it was not a "good" thing.

Mitch was thinking about dropping the grate closed. It was a look in his eyes, as surely as it was an idea in his mind. "Let it go. Tell everybody it was too heavy, and I'd been holding it up, too long. Just... let it drop."

And a second thought warred with the first one. "Winslow will kill me, if I do."

Ike had stayed near the grate, as Rennie had run in. But it was Mitch who'd had to hold the weight of the bars. Ike wasn't tall enough, and his spindly shoulders were hardly built for strength.

Vincent blinked the memory away and looked back at the tree, its dark branches coming back into focus.

"He was going to drop it. He was going to leave me. I could... see it in his eyes, Winslow. It was a thing we both knew, he and I. But I also saw his fear of you. I saw him think it. I saw him... remember it."

Vincent examined his replica of the pickaxe, the one tool the adult Winslow was almost never without. The one tool he'd learned to swing before any of them did. The one tool he'd used to try and dig Vincent and Father out with, when the tunnel near the maze had collapsed on the two of them. He was a hard man, and could be pointy, at times. Like the tool he favored.

"Mitch stayed where he was. He held open the grate. I entered just as he dropped it, just as the bat came down on the metal. Ike slid the bolt home, and secured the latch. He... the hobo ... screamed at us. All of us."

"Freaks! You're all a bunch of freaks! I'll kill you!" the hobo had shouted at them.

"Mitch knew better than to stay and taunt him ... them. We all... ran, and kept running. Past the maze. Past the wind on the stairs. Past the bridge, past everything, until we all found our way to safety; to our own chambers."

Vincent tilted his head and regarded his tiny offering of remembrance. "You came in and checked on me, that night, and I pretended to be asleep. But I wasn't. I couldn't."

Vincent remembered the terrified boy he had been, how badly fear had gripped him. And how Winslow's warning to Mitch had probably saved his life.

There might have been more of those warnings, from Winslow to Mitch, or at least some words exchanged. Within a week, Mitch was gone. Within a few months, Ike and Rennie's families had moved on, too, though Vincent didn't think Winslow had anything to do with that.

Not everyone who stays here stays forever, Vincent thought, knowing even in boyhood that he would, that he would have to.

And somehow, I always thought you would. He thought to his departed friend. *That somehow, some way, we would both become old men, together, down here. With you always just a little bit older than me. And probably always just a bit wiser.*

But now, it was not to be. Now... there was still an empty seat on the council, with no one feeling in a hurry to fill it, considering, and there was always going to be an empty place in Vincent's heart, one once occupied by one strong, black, fierce, singular man.

"Thank you," Vincent said as he rose, knowing the thanks was years overdue. "Thank you for saving me, then. Thank you for saving us, now. We... exist at your sacrifice, at all you gave." He inclined his head. "I know you did it willingly. But that doesn't mean a debt isn't owed."

He placed the drawing stick into the fire, thoughtfully. Low flames licked at the wood.

Vincent stepped close to the tree and touched his small token, again. Near it, there was tied a newspaper clipping, with a notice circled in ink: *"The Wreck of My Memories."* Father had clearly been here. The bit of newspaper had been the thing that had reunited him with Margaret Chase.

"We will all try to ... honor what you did for us. What you meant to us," Vincent told Winslow, yet felt he was perhaps addressing others, as well. That was the problem with a Blue Yule Tree. It always invited more than just one memory of more than just one passing.

"Be at peace," Vincent said to all of them, "And know that all our lives were better, and possible even, thanks to you."

He was just about to leave, when Jamie came in the room, a tiny, wrapped “something” in her hand.

“Oh! Vincent! I’m sorry, I didn’t realize. I’ll... I’ll leave you to your privacy,” she said, meaning to back out the way she’d come in.

“No, Jamie, I was... just leaving. I believe I said what I needed to. You may have the room,” he replied, aware that Blue Yule was often observed alone.

She looked toward the tree, and down at the small offering in her hand. “It’s a hammer. I made him a little hammer. The handle is a shaft from one of my crossbow bolts.”

“It’s for Winslow, then?” Vincent asked unnecessarily. Jamie nodded.

“I saw Father here, earlier. I thought maybe he was here for Winslow, too,” Jamie said. “But then I remembered Margaret.”

Vincent sighed, seeming in no real hurry to leave. “Indeed. In a way, the year has been marked by losses for him. As it has for us all.”

Jamie walked over to the tree, unwrapped her tiny memento, and hung it not too far from Vincent’s own. “I wish I’d really helped.” She looked down, seeming to stare at the tan pot. “I wish I’d been... even just a little faster. It might have made a difference.”

It was the first time Vincent realized that Jamie felt any kind of guilt for Winslow’s passing.

“Jamie, you must never think that anything that happened was any fault of yours.” He stepped closer to her, and put a steadying hand on her shoulder. “I share far more blame than you. But for me, he would have been safe, at home.”

Jamie shook her head at that. “It was Paracelsus’ fault, not yours. Paracelsus, and that... thing I shot.”

You're right, it was. It's right of you to say it.

"Pascal and I owed you our lives, that day."

Jamie accepted the compliment as she regarded her little ornament, then took in the rest of the tree.

"Do you suppose there will ever be a year when we don't need a Blue Yule tree?" she asked, looking at the gathering of tiny trinkets and bits of flotsam tied to it.

Vincent solemnly shook his head. "I think... I think that loss is a thing we must all learn to accept with grace, even as we fear it. That as long as we keep our memories close, the people we remember here... still live on, in their way."

Jamie looked at the little trio of pickaxes, hanging near each other. "I made him mad. And sometimes, he yelled. But I know he didn't mean anything by it," Jamie replied, speaking about Winslow, again.

"He admired your spirit. And feared for your safety." Vincent realized how much that sentiment well described Winslow's protectiveness back when Vincent was younger, as well. "It's perhaps a thing he did with all of us."

"I know. It doesn't quite feel like Christmas, without him here."

Vincent acknowledged the sad truth of that. "No, indeed. It doesn't." He put his large arm around her slender shoulders. "But a Yule tree is always an evergreen. So the promise of the branches tells us that once our mourning time passes... it will."

They both turned to go, when they nearly collided with Pascal, bearing a red tin of cookies.

“William’s shortbread,” the Pipemaster explained. “I was just, um, bringing these for Winslow.” He set the little tin under the tree. Judging by the smell, the cookies were fresh baked.

“Ah. They were his favorite,” Vincent said.

“Oh! That’s right!” Jamie rubbed her forehead. “I forgot. How could I forget that?” she asked, aware that in the short months since Winslow’s passing, some memories about him were slipping away. The thought clearly troubled her.

“It was hard for me to,” Pascal replied. “Every time William banged on the pipes that there were fresh cookies out of the oven, Winslow would bang back that he suddenly needed to get some work done near the kitchen.” Pascal smiled at the memory. “It’s okay, Jamie. Time... well. It does pass on.”

“He was the first person who ever told me I’d be good with a bow,” Jamie recalled. “At the time, I thought he was saying it just to get me out of his hair, so I’d go practice more, but... but I know he meant it.”

“There was a time when I was young, when I think he saved my life. And he wasn’t even there,” Vincent revealed, having a feeling that a round of story-telling and reminiscences were about to take place.

“That must be a great story,” Pascal urged.

“And one I don’t think Father has heard. Perhaps we might... visit with him? Share some of our memories?” Vincent asked.

Jamie brightened. “I’d like that. Can I go get Mouse?”

“I would think it remiss not to include him,” Vincent replied. *Yes. This is good. This is right. Family, sharing memories of those who pass on. Making sure they... live, again. Especially during Yule.*

“I’ll go get Mouse!” Jamie darted off down the tunnel.

“Maybe William would like to come?” Pascal offered. “I could go see if he’s not too busy.”

Vincent smiled, as the list of those who loved the gruff stone mason grew longer.

“Eli and Winslow’s father were good friends,” Vincent recalled. “He knew Winslow from almost the day he was born.”

Pascal nodded as the two of them left the chamber, together. At the first intersection, they separated, and took off in different directions.

Vincent knew that more than a few tears were about to be shed, not just for Winslow, but perhaps for others who were no longer there. But he also knew that for every tear, there was likely to be at least one smile, and most likely more than that. After all, it could be said of those who’d been lost that they’d touched many, and lived good, rich lives, for the most part. Lives where they’d shared their gifts, with those they cared for.

Merry Christmas, Winslow. Merry Christmas, Margaret. Vincent thought, as he made his way to get Eli. He recalled the wealth of ornaments on the tree, and how many people were represented, there.

And all of you. May you find the blessings of Yule on you, and on all of us, now, and always.



*No matter where you are in your own fairy tale, I wish you love. ~
Cindy*