



Valentine Show and Tell

by Angie

There was a flurry of activity in the sewing room during the weeks leading up to Valentine's Day, and the diminutive Annabelle was a small whirlwind as she met with the couples for a special event that had suddenly gathered eager participants.

Catherine felt she had to apologize to their seamstress for what had happened. Jenny had told her a theatre company was cleaning out its wardrobe department to make way for more modern costumes, and Catherine had immediately offered to take them all, sight unseen, for a reasonable - she thought - donation to the troupe. The offer was accepted and Catherine had arranged for the boxes to be taken to the tunnel community's warehouse, where they were quickly transported below to Annabelle's sewing chamber. She knew the tunnel residents, who delighted in putting on theatrical events, would find endless ways to use the windfall of fancy fabrics, no matter what condition the costumes were in.

Eager hands had sorted out the several dozen costumes into male, female, child, and 'beyond repair'. The idea of a Valentine's fashion show had been suggested and eagerly seized upon. It had also been decided that couples would keep their costumes secret from each other and work groups were arranged accordingly. It soon emerged that there were more than enough useable costume pieces to satisfy everyone.

Catherine had decided on a romantic number that looked like a huge flower. Vincent had been convinced to choose one too, not entirely without misgivings, but he was unable to refuse anything Catherine wanted that was within his power. Before long, everyone was dismantling, adapting and repairing costumes, in preparation for the special day.

Annabelle made it plain that everyone should work on their own costumes, as much as possible, although she would help as needed. Naturally, there was far more work than anyone - except perhaps Annabelle - had anticipated. The workroom was noisy with groans and the rustling of recalcitrant fabrics.

Catherine had no idea how Annabelle managed to make sense of it all - but apparently, her memory was prodigious and she never forgot the smallest detail on any costume.

Every time Catherine entered the sewing chamber, it looked worse than before. No regular work was being done, in order to make room for the billowing, glittery fabrics, ribbons, braid, and assorted furbelows on the work tables.

Annabelle was beginning to look a little weary a week before Valentine's Day. Catherine, by way of

apology, brought in some treats and lemonade from William, made by special request, and everyone's eyes brightened a little at the sight.

There seemed nowhere to put the tray, but Catherine had thought of that too. She turned to the entrance and Vincent strolled in with a folding card table. He carefully positioned it, then took a curious look around. He attracting good-humoured shouts of "GO" from several women, and pretended to leave reluctantly, after showing his teeth in a not very convincing growl.

Laughter followed him out and Catherine, again, marvelled at this Vincent, the one she only saw on long stays in the tunnel world. He was loved, accepted and often funny. She saw another side of him of course, the virile lover and stalwart protector. This one enthralled her just as much.

Now, she reflected, she would be here often. She had left the DAs office and set up a practice in their brownstone. She worked her own hours, still taking some work from Joe, but only those cases which offered no danger. She was able to concentrate now on helping women, children and families in trouble. It was rewarding work, and her association with the tunnel community meant that, occasionally, she could recommend new residents.

When Vincent was gone, the workgroup gave huge sighs of relief and needles were downed to partake of the goodies. Everyone sat on the floor, but since there were plenty of old carpet squares, at least the they didn't risk haemorrhoids on top of their pricked fingers and tired backs. Catherine's fingers were getting calluses from using a seam ripper to extract her enormous, lacy, glittery flower from its net fabric backing. She planned to make it into a dress.

Catherine sighed and looked at their hostess as she sat down.

"Annabelle, I don't know what came over me. I promise never to do this again."

Annabelle's laugh didn't sound quite as maniacal as normal, Catherine noticed, but her eyes were still merry. The number of large-headed pins stuck into an impromptu pincushion - a thick velvet ribbon around her bouffant auburn hair - seemed to have doubled yet again.

Noticing Catherine's look at her "pin cushion" Annabelle gave a slight grimace and gave a mock frown at the ladies around her. "I keep finding pins on the floor," she remarked in a loud voice.

"Nevertheless, Catherine, we haven't had so much fun since that time we made all the men cod pieces," she commented.

There was general laughter at that, followed by some wistful reminiscences, eliciting hoots of merriment.

"That was fun, but so much easier than all this ..." Catherine gestured at the chaos.

"I think these costumes might need a little more time to remove," Olivia remarked with a grin. She had found billows of multi-coloured tulle and a stretchy band studded with green rhinestones. How it was all going to be put together Catherine couldn't imagine, but decided she preferred to be surprised. She had work to do on her own, so was not paying much attention to what others were doing - and no one would ask her for any advice on sewing. Everyone seemed to be very concentrated on their own work.

Olivia was happier than Catherine had ever seen her. Kanin would love her no matter what she wore. In that sense, he was much like Vincent.

Catherine couldn't wait to see what Vincent would wear. He looked good in anything, but his costume would certainly be special. Annabelle would see to that.

"It always looks worse before it looks better," Annabelle commented with a huge sigh. "We'll be done in three more days, then we go back to our usual patching and repairs - which are piling up over there."

She gestured at a huge wooden chest that was overflowing with assorted clothes in a far corner, out of the way. "Anything that falls apart in the meantime, that person will have to deal with it in their chamber."

No one seemed too worried. Everyone knew Annabelle kept plenty of spare clothes around - soft, much repaired, but fine for emergencies or new arrivals. No one lacked for clothing, although it was often mostly patched and pieced.

Catherine would never have believed, in her former life, that such clothing could be beautiful, but it was. They had design, and she was sure their dwarf seamstress, whose own outfits were always extraordinary, had added a little of her love of flair to every garment.

The clothing wouldn't fit in above, but down here it seemed absolutely right. She felt a little out of place in her ordinary jeans and sweater. She wasn't keen on long skirts when there was work to do. They made her feel awkward.

Annabelle broke the silence that had suddenly filled the chamber. Everyone was relaxed and almost sleepy.

"Ladies, it's time we got back to work. We have several hours before lunch. Let's make the best of it."

The group returned to their work tables and Catherine sat down in front of her own costume, which was giving her some problems. Either it had been made for someone much larger, or it had been meant to flare in every direction over a frame of some kind. The cyclamen pink flower she had carefully removed was unwieldy and she was at a loss to decide how to make it into a garment. It was comprised of a number of crocheted and sequined petals, with open work and glitter here and there.

Annabelle touched her on the shoulder.

"What's the problem?" she asked.

"I can't figure out how to connect this flower so it forms a dress."

Annabelle nodded. "I think in your case, we need to do something a bit extreme. You'll have to hold it in place. I think you should put the centre of the flower in front of your left hip, there. Come over to the change area and I'll figure out where to put the closures so you can get into it - and Vincent can get you out of it," she added with a grin. "I have some large snaps and hooks and eyes."

Catherine gathered up the huge flower and followed Annabelle to a corner of the chamber where two room dividers acted as a change room. She quickly shed her clothes onto a convenient chair, and held the flower over her hip as directed. The two women soon realized that the flower sagged in some areas and was too tight in others. A petal arrangement on the top seemed ready-made for armholes, but could not be positioned correctly - or comfortably.

Annabelle walked around Catherine, grasping bits of the flower and pulling it here. Finally, she gave a triumphant '*eureka*'. She put a pin here and another there, yanking the petal arrangement too and fro, joined a couple of loose petal tips, and then stood back to look at her handiwork.

"How does that feel? Look at it in the mirror."

Catherine shifted her body a little. It was quite snug, but when she turned to look at herself in the long mirror, she gasped. There was a string of suggestive openings in the crochet work between her breasts and others outlined her hip and leg. The centre of the flower over her hip, with the petals flaring out from that point, made it look like a thousand dollar designer one-off.

"Amazing," she gasped, marvelling at how Annabelle had accomplished the seemingly impossible. "It's perfect."

Annabelle chuckled. "I think Vincent will be surprised," she said with a slight leer.

Catherine laughed. "You know he wouldn't care if I was in sackcloth, but he does notice when I make a special effort."

"Indeed, he has extraordinary taste. Wait until you see *his* costume!"

"I'm sure it will make him look wonderful. Everything does."

Annabelle got a distant look in her eye and Catherine recognized it.

"He IS special, isn't he?" she asked softly.

The dwarf looked up at her and sighed. "We all envy you, but I live for those happy hugs and kisses he bestows me on rare occasions."

"I know," Catherine whispered. "And he's much more willing to do so these days, I think."

"Yes, thanks to you, Catherine. And we're all grateful."

Annabelle shook her head of high piled hair and grinned.

"Well, let's get that off you and I'll show you where to put the closures. You might have to show Vincent where they are when you want to take it off. They won't be easy to see."

Catherine decided she had better make sure of that. She didn't want her clothing ripped off - not this time, she giggled internally.

"And I think we can make you a headpiece that will beautifully set it off," Annabelle declared. She showed Catherine a smaller set of petals of the same material, and gathered their tips together, fixing them with a pin.

"You'll be able to thread your hair through the openings," Annabelle told her.

Catherine had let her hair grow, and in the process it had also lightened somewhat. She planned to streak it just a little for Valentine's day. She had always admired Vincent's hair, and although she couldn't duplicate its beautiful tawny colour, she could make her own look less 'mousey'. The word made her smile. Mouse had blonde hair, but it was usually messy - as well as mousey.

"Beautiful," Catherine declared, viewing the 'hat'. This would mean she wouldn't need an 'up-do' as well as a dye job.

"Will there be someone to help me put all this on for the show?" she asked.

"I'll be backstage," Annabelle replied. "There are a number of people who will need help with ties, buttons, snaps ... and accessories, so I won't be alone."

Catherine stepped out of her dress and put her clothes back on. Back at the table, she carefully sewed on several large snaps and a few hooks and eyes where Annabelle had marked them.

She then held up the dress and gazed at it with pleasure. Yes, this would wow Vincent. She looked around, wondering where she could put it until the big day.

Annabelle gestured behind her and Catherine realized there was another pair of room dividers hiding some clothing racks. She put her dress and headpiece on a hanger, carefully replacing the sheet that covered everything. There were several racks, all hidden under sheets, presumably hiding other costumes.

Perhaps her "gift" of the costumes hadn't been such a bad idea after all.

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Vincent entered the sewing chamber after lunch, for what he hoped was the last time. He joined the group of men, who were quietly and intensely preoccupied, and picked up the top he was working on. Although he was very happy with his costume, sewing was not his forte. His long nails made it difficult, but worse was their sharpness. He had to be very careful not to rip anything. The stress of trying to be delicate gave him a neck ache.

His costume, as it happened, had not needed a great deal of work, once he had picked out something. He had found a jacket that fit him and a pair of pants that made his jaw drop, and which he was sure Catherine would appreciate. He would also wear a plush sweater from which Annabelle had had him remove the sleeves. She then told him to hem the armholes, which he did now, then held it up before him. It was certainly completely foreign to anything else he owned.

"Sexy," was her comment when he tried it on behind one of the screens. He blushed but said nothing. The sweater was stretchy and very snug. He tensed his muscles and heard Annabelle gasp beside him. He looked down at her and caught her expression. Her didn't know what to say to such naked

admiration. He decided silence was still the best reply.

Annabelle then leered. "I think you had better save that move that until you're alone with Catherine," she remarked. "That jacket will hide our little secret, though."

Vincent sighed. He had never really thought much about his body, until Catherine had demonstrated her adoration. His attention had always been on his face and hands - those parts of him impossible to disguise in everyday life. His body, like most of the men below, reflected the work they did. Hard labour did not allow any of them to run to fat, except perhaps William, who probably sampled a good deal of what he made. His body hair, which Catherine also loved to distraction, did not bother him nearly as much as the rest.

Annabelle handed him a belt and he looked at it in amazement. It was composed of pearly red squares and matched his sweater perfectly. It was stretchy and closed with a wide hook.

"Do you have footwear?" Annabelle asked.

"I have black boots," Vincent replied.

"Then you're set," Annabelle proclaimed.

He hung up his sweater with the rest of his costume on the rack, gave her a hug and brotherly kiss, and gratefully left to return to his chamber. He wanted to wrap Catherine's present. She was in the kitchen helping the children with their special contribution.

Since many of the other women were still busily engaged in costume tweaks, Catherine had offered to help with cookie making and decorating. The children were happy to have her with them.

Catherine decided that the work was best done in an orderly fashion. William had made the batter earlier, and put it into a cold storage room so it would harden enough to roll out. Catherine retrieved the two huge balls of cookie batter, and organized the children into teams. One would roll it out, half at a time, another group would wield the heart-shaped cookie cutters, a third team would put on the candy sprinkles, and a fourth would carefully lift the cookies onto cookie sheets for baking.

It should have worked, she thought ruefully later. They got started and the work was progressing in a fine assembly line manner. She gathered up the left over batter and put it into the bowl, to be rolled out after the rest was all done.

The dough was rolled out on wax paper on a big table in the dining chamber. Catherine watched and smiled. The cookie sheets were filling up quickly.

Suddenly there was a yell from Samantha, a the far end of the table and a dark form ran erratically across the table, leaving decorative footprints in a number of the cookies waiting to be moved onto the cookie sheet.

"Arthur!" Catherine yelled and went in hot pursuit. She cornered the raccoon in the kitchen and William quickly threw an empty flour sack over it, then with a quick move, tumbled the animal into it and grabbed the neck closed. He held the bag away from him with a grimace. Arthur was moving frantically around in the sack. Catherine guessed that the bag had become a necessary part of the kitchenware, since it had been readily to hand.

William used a metal whisk to tap out a command on the pipes. Mouse appeared so quickly, that it was obvious he had been in pursuit of his pet.

He looked shamefacedly at everyone, grabbed the bag from William and made a fast retreat, managing to avoid one of the cook's feet aimed at his rear end.

"Going. Don't kick Mouse. Going!" he protested.

"Ewww," grimaced Samantha, as Catherine returned to examine the damage.

William came up behind her, made a face, and deftly lifted away the ones which had been damaged.

“Fit for the composter,” he remarked. “I think there’s still enough for everyone,” he rumbled, rolling his eyes at Catherine.

The work continued. The leftover batter was rolled again, but being softer now, did not cooperate as well. The resulting cookies looked a little ragged, but there were now six trays in all - plenty, as William said.

They carried the trays carefully to the kitchen and William put them in his oven. Now we wait,” Catherine told the children, plumping herself down in a chair in relief. The children arranged themselves around her. William’s stove, being an old-fashioned charcoal-fired iron one, didn’t have a window, so there was nothing to do but clean up. Catherine led them in a quick song - “*C is for cookie, that’s good enough for me*”, while they carried the dirty dishes to the sink, washed them, then put them in the racks to dry. She delegated several children to wipe the tables and sweep up the floor, and the song became louder and more raucous.

Just as she thought she’d go deaf, William roared out that the cookies were done and there a moment of blessed silence, and then excited children ran into the kitchen.

“Oooh. Wow! Awesome,” came from the assembled children and those closest to the cookies reached out a hand.

“Wait, wait!” William ordered, and put the trays onto racks on his work table.

“Don’t touch them. They’re still soft,” he told them. “You can each have one when they’re cool.”

There were groans at this miserliness, so Catherine led them out into the dining chamber again and led them in a long snake dance around the tables. A few minutes later, exhausted, the children were happy to sit down. William brought them all each one cookie, and Catherine, her mouth full of hers, waved them out of the dining room. Their happy yells retreated down the tunnel and there was silence.

She looked at William, who gave an enormous sigh that seemed to shake him from head to toe.

“Go back to Vincent,” he told her gruffly. “Not much more to do until the big day. Thanks for your help.”

Catherine waved at him and gladly returned to Vincent’s chamber. He wasn’t there and she felt grubby, so she shed her clothes, grabbed a big towel and housecoat, and trotted down to the bathing chamber he shared with Father, behind the fan window. She put a small towel on the hook in Father’s entrance, to warn him the bath was occupied, and then dropped her housecoat and slid into the warm pool. She lay on the sloping side with a sigh of relief and closed her eyes.

She awakened to the feel of a unique mouth kissing hers and looked into Vincent’s azure eyes.

“You taste delicious,” he commented. “I hope you have more of those.”

“Vincent, I don’t want to see another cookie ... for at least 48 hours,” Catherine declared.

“I guess I will have to wait, then. You *are* sweeter.”

He proceeded to show her how sweet and soon food was forgotten. They continued their bath after a short rest, then dried themselves as best they could and returned to his chamber. They put on soft and comfortable clothing, planning a quiet night together.

It being by then almost dinner time, they decided that they wished to eat where they were. Both were tired.

William had announced earlier that dinners would be informal until Valentine’s Day - serve yourself meals of soup, bread, cheese and salads. Trays could be taken back to chambers. A work party would take care of the tray dishes in the morning. He wanted no one in his kitchen that night.

Vincent offered to get them a tray, and Catherine sank gratefully onto the bed. When he returned, they sat at his table and made short work of the soup and buttered bread. They laughed when a small napkin untied to reveal four Valentine cookies. William had added it to the tray as Vincent was leaving the dining chamber.

“William is a treasure,” Vincent remarked, wolfing down two before Catherine could get her hand on one. “Remember, you don’t want any,” Vincent reminded her.

She looked at him wryly and took one of the two remaining, eating it in tiny bites with a maximum show of teeth and tongue. Vincent’s eyes never left her mouth as she did this and when she lifted her hand to lick her fingers clean, he grabbed it and sucked each one with great care.

Neither thought about the remaining cookie as they moved together into a hug that melded them as close as was possible.

Catherine wanted to stay in this position forever, but her legs suddenly felt weak, and Vincent realized he too was exhausted. He picked her up and carried her to his bed. They both crawled under the covers and spooned together, were soon asleep.

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It was the day before Valentine’s Day and the community seemed to breathe a collective sigh of relief. Even the children were subdued - but in their case, it was anticipation that kept them quiet.

This was a normal occurrence the day before a planned event. This was a day to make sure everything was in place, no detail forgotten, and a day to relax and enjoy quiet pursuits and friends. William’s buffet meals were casual and light.

The evening arrived in due course and the tunnel community turned in early. Vincent and Catherine placed their gifts for the next day on his table, a little tantalization. They made soft love in his big bed and lay wrapped in each others arms, sated, for some time before they again spooned together for sleep.

Nothing, Catherine thought as she drifted off, could match the pleasure of Vincent’s arms around her and the feel of his hirsute and muscular body pressed against hers. It was a wonder she could sleep at all, but she had found the sensation perfect for the dreams of what might be, someday.

For his part, Vincent found that holding Catherine’s small body against his own gave him a serenity he had never dreamed of experiencing - and he never tired of it. She was safe, she was here in his bed, and she was in his arms. Nothing could make him happier - unless it was knowing, through their bond, that Catherine too was completely content. Sleep claimed him quickly.

Vincent seldom remembered his dreams now. He always awakened with a feeling of serenity - so different to those years before he met Catherine - and while he was trying to rationalize the fears of a lifetime.

Valentine’s Day dawned with messages on the pipes alerting everyone to be in the dining room within the hour. Vincent and Catherine lazed in bed for a few minutes, then decided to take a joint bath. They quickly gathered their towels and housecoats and went down the small flight of steps to the bathing chamber. Vincent placed a towel in Father’s entrance and they allowed themselves a leisurely - and almost platonic - bathing session.

When they were clean and rinsed, Vincent lifted Catherine to him, and planted a large, long kiss on her mouth.

“Happy Valentine’s Day,” he rumbled at her.

“Happy Valentine’s Day my love,” Catherine returned, loving the feel of his hands on her bottom and letting him know it by hugging him tightly.

He put her down reluctantly, and they dried off and returned to his chamber. There they put on soft sweat suits - the chosen garb since they would soon enough be dressed in their new finery for the Valentine's Day show. Vincent's clothing was a light blue that made his eyes shine like sunlit sea, carefully patched at knees and rear end, with grey sweat suit material. Catherine had found a similar suit in Annabelle's clothing stacks and wore it with pride. It was a hunter green, that she knew accentuated her eyes, patched with dark grey at elbows and knees. She loved the old cotton sweats with their looped reverse side, soft from multiple washings. It fit snugly but not too much so. The tunnel community had never followed the fashions above and straight legs were always the norm.

Dressed at last, they sat down at Vincent's table and regarded the two gifts. Catherine handed her his gift, a thick square that puzzled him. Not a journal, he decided. Vincent's gift to Catherine was a small heart-shaped box wrapped in wrinkled gold foil.

"Open yours first," Catherine pleaded. She couldn't wait to see his expression.

Vincent bowed his head with a smile and carefully removed the colourful Valentine's Day paper. He found a book, of sorts. The cover said, in gold script "My Keepsakes". Opening it, he found the first page said "Valentine's Day" in Catherine's handwriting, and under it, part of the page, was a small envelope with a scalloped flap. It had something in it. Vincent carefully extracted three tiny foil-wrapped hearts. He looked at Catherine with a question in his eyes.

"This is where you can keep the little reminders of your special days," she told him. There are three hearts - one for each of us now, and one to keep there."

Vincent handed her one, and quickly opened and ate another. The third was returned to the little pouch. Vincent took up his fountain pen, and carefully wrote "*Delicious*" on the outside of the pouch.

Catherine chuckled. She was sure that adjective would apply to something else by the end of the day.

"Your turn," Vincent reminded her, breaking into her daydream.

Catherine carefully removed the foil wrapper and then pried open the little box. Inside were two pink quartz earrings, miniature versions of her crystal necklace, but held in a gold wire cage attached to small hooks. They would look wonderful with her costume, and she quickly inserted them into her ears. She had had her ears pierced a few months ago, wanting to forgo the screw type earrings. She had lost more than one - and odd earrings were good for nothing.

She pulled Vincent to her and gave him a kiss. He smiled and carefully folded the gold paper and placed it in the keepsake pouch.

"I wish you could keep a kiss in there," she remarked.

"The memory of them never fades," he told her, his voice deep with emotion.

"And there's plenty more where that one came from," Catherine whispered.

The breakfast alert sounded on the pipes and broke into their reverie. With audible sighs, the two lovers gathered their wits and strolled hand-in-hand to the dining chamber, wondering what delights William had prepared for them. They were sure he would not restrain himself to the main event at lunchtime.

The hall was full of happy voices when they arrived and some laughter at the buffet table alerted them that something was unusual. They quickly joined the line-up and then laughed in turn when they saw the porridge. William had coloured it pink and a large bowl of cinnamon hearts invited people to add something extra. Catherine complied. These were one of her favourite things on Valentine's Day. Vincent smiled and also added a few. They found a place to sit, not far from Father, and gratefully spooned up the porridge. Both were hungry. They had not finished when William appeared next to Father and began to pass down platters of muffins.

They were cornmeal, Catherine guessed, each with a little heart dusted in icing sugar on the top. She took two and Vincent three, before passing the platters on. They kept coming, as if in endless supply. A bite revealed that William had added crumbled bacon to them and Catherine closed her eyes in bliss.

How was it she had not smelled that when they came in? She looked at William, who was beaming with pride, watching the reactions to his treat, and guessed he had done it two days ago, when everyone was distracted with other work.

“Exquisite,” she shouted at him and he bowed in her direction.

There followed a impromptu round of applause, which followed him back into his kitchen, his face red with pleasure and embarrassment.

Next pots of tea were passed around, Earl Grey, Catherine realized. It was a perfect accompaniment to the muffins and she sighed with pleasure.

As everyone relaxed with their tea, Father stood up and rapped for attention.

“Happy Valentine’s Day everyone. We have some special events planned for today, as you all know. Just to be clear on the schedule, we should all be in the Great Hall at 10 am - in about three hours. The stage will be the focus of attention. There will be a short concert by our own tunnel consort first, then some dance numbers by the children. Following that will be what you all have been waiting for with great anticipation - the couples fashion show. After that, we will prepare the Hall for our main meal around 1 pm. That will end the formal events. Then, we will clear the floor and prepare for dancing. Those who wish can go their separate ways, but those who wish to do a little walking to allow the meal to digest, will find our tunnels well lit.

“The children will have a separate party in the schoolroom, where Mary and I will ensure they get into no one’s hair and get to bed on time. Tonight, they will all sleep in the dormitory.

“By evening, we expect you will all want to retire early to your chambers, to enjoy a little private ... rumination. William will provide a buffet of hors d’oeuvres in the dining chamber for anyone who needs further sustenance before then.

“A sentry schedule is posted on the blackboard behind me. As you can see, no one will be on duty for more than an hour at a time - and we have decided that there will be no one on duty for the period of our main celebration, so that everyone can enjoy the entertainment. Instead, we are going to rely on Mouse’s early warning system, as we have done on special events in the past - and pray that he has worked out the bugs. If there is any disturbance on the perimeter a warning bell will sound in the Great Hall. I sincerely hope that this will not happen. I’m sure that the weather above - a blizzard, I am informed - will ensure this nothing unusual occurs.

“That is all the announcements. I wish everyone an enjoyable Valentine’s Day.”

Father sat down to applause and the washing up and clean-up team quickly gathered the dishes and set to work. Everyone else meandered off to their chambers.

Vincent and Catherine returned to his chamber and lay down on the big bed.

Catherine was having a hard time understanding how so much could have been planned without her knowing. She looked over at Vincent, whose eyes were closed. But she knew he wasn’t asleep.

“Did you know about all this?” she asked him.

“No. I suspect Father and Mary were largely responsible. Of course we all helped decorate the Great Hall, but we enjoy surprises, so we don’t ask for details.”

“I think a nap might be a good idea now,” Catherine remarked. “It’s going to be a long day.”

“And we want to be awake for the finale,” Vincent grinned at her.

“Yes indeed.”

They both closed their eyes and were soon asleep.

They awoke suddenly to an alert over the pipes. It was time to go to the Great Hall. The tunnels were lively with laughter and anticipation as they made their way down the long stone staircase to the big

door. Vincent lifted off the huge wooden bar, as he did at Winterfest, and everyone flowed into the room, this time aglow with mellow light.

Catherine's jaw dropped at the sheer volume of red and pink hearts, lanterns, candles, chandeliers. At one end of the hall, against the balcony, a stage had been created, its curtains closed. Arrayed before it were a selection of mismatched chairs, couches and benches, the harder surfaces supplied with cushions.

Everyone seated themselves, the musicians moving into the wings of the stage, where sounds of them tuning up were soon heard. The children, who were to appear after the concert, were all sitting on benches in the front row, and squirming with impatience.

Suddenly several lanterns were positioned above the stage on a pulley line, lighting it considerably brighter than the rest of the Hall. There was a drum roll and trumpet blast, and Cullen emerged from the left, dressed in the tails and top hat of a circus ringmaster and holding high a shiny bullhorn. After waiting for silence, he began his spiel.

"Ladies and gentlemen ... and fair children ... welcome to this special Valentine's Day extravaganza. We hope you will enjoy our modest attempts at entertainment."

He paused a moment and there was a sound from behind the curtain which sounded like a giant fart - but was, as everyone knew, Eric trying to get air into his tuba. His insistence on playing an instrument larger than himself had resulted in helpless hilarity from anyone within earshot, including other members of his musical consort. However, Mouse had devised him a special stool to rest the huge horn on, and thus encouraged, Eric had made remarkable progress. However, his first attempts of the day were always reliably comical.

Cullen, in full view of the audience, coughed, apparently trying not to laugh and ruin the effect of his dignity. He got himself under control with an obvious effort and continued.

"First we are pleased to present the 'Windjammer Consort' ..." Another fart punctuated the announcement, and Cullen again had to pause to get himself under control. He received no sympathy from his audience who were nearly falling off their chairs with suppressed humour, their eyes streaming tears, their laughter muted with difficulty.

Vincent had hidden his face inside his hair, but Catherine could hear his strangled attempts to control himself. She had not expected that and found her eyes watering with laughter, although she managed to prevent herself from doing so loudly.

Cullen waved his bullhorn, widened his stance, staring out at the worst perpetrators in the audience with a look that could freeze fire.

"ENOUGH!" he bellowed through the bullhorn. Everyone straightened in their seats and silence reigned, but for a few errant coughs.

"This talented group will play a medley of well-known love songs," Cullen continued.

"At the end of their act, we have a little contest for the adults. Name as many of the pieces as you can, and put them on a slip of paper over there on the table, fold it up and put it into the box. Two winners will be chosen to receive one of these"

Cullen held up a small gift basket wrapped in glittery pink fabric.

"This contains some delectable treats and sundry delicacies."

"And no cheating or consultations. Everyone must guess for themselves."

He took off his top hat and waved at someone in the wings and left stage right. The curtains parted in the middle, amid another drum roll. The eight members of the consort were revealed. Eric's tuba was prominent in the back, but its player quite invisible.

What followed was remarkable, Catherine thought. None of the children was more than 14, but they all played like pros. Even Eric's tuba was on time and in tune. She wondered if he would have any

breath left for lunch, especially after his intense blowing for the “Perhaps Love” segment. She couldn’t remember that song having so much bass, but guessed that Eric had demanded a larger role in one segment.

The troupe ended with the theme from “Love Story” and the applause was heartfelt and long. All the musicians stood up and Eric left his tuba to join them in the front. They joined hands and bowed together, amid many hoots and whistles of appreciation.

The curtains closed again, somewhat erratically, and Cullen again strolled onto centre stage and used his bullhorn to get attention.

“There will now be a 15 minute break, to allow you to enter the contest ... and give our stagehands time to set up for the next act.”

There was a massive grinding of chairs against the stone floor and everyone stood up. Catherine and Vincent went to the table and each took a slip of lined paper and pencil. Catherine wondered how many he would recognize, since his taste seemed to run to traditional classics rather than pop.

She moved onto a corner of the table, and started to write. She had counted 12 tunes in the medley. She wrote down 10 and then stopped. What was missing? *Drat*, she berated herself. She looked at the list, but there was no inspiration there. She considered her options and decided to take a chance. She wrote down two titles of similar themes, folded up her paper and slid it into the box. Vincent was already sitting back in his seat. Had he finished that quickly?

She sat down beside him and looked at him. He looked a little grim.

“Did you guess them all?” she asked finally, realizing he wasn’t going to volunteer anything.

“All but one, Catherine.”

“Huh! I thought you might have trouble with some of them.”

Vincent grinned at her.

“I admit I do not listen to such music, normally. However, the children have been practicing for some time - and I conducted them when Father’s lumbago was bad.”

“Oh, no fair!” Catherine commented.

Vincent looked at her.

“Catherine, everyone in this hall has heard this medley being practiced - but likely had other business than remembering it.”

“ATTENTION!”

Everyone looked at the stage, where Cullen was again standing impatiently, legs apart. There was a shuffling as everyone returned to their seats, followed by complete silence.

“Our next act features a special number by the very talented Whirlwind Dancers.”

The name garnered a few snorts of merriment, quickly brought under control. Cullen ignored the sound effects and again waved and left the stage.

The curtain opened to an empty stage, and a huge fabric backdrop decorated with hearts caught up in glittery swirls of gold and silver.

Suddenly a single flute broke out in to a beautiful glissando, and a triangle tinged in counterpoint.

Several older children in green tutus and short glittery jackets slid gracefully into centre stage and began a complex pattern. The music changed to *The Nutcracker Suite*. The dancers were joined by a group of small children in motley costumes with colourful silk trailers. They wove in and out of the older dancers. Then a third group, all boys dressed in striped pants and brilliant red jackets, sashayed onto the stage and ran in short bursts around the rest. The pattern became even more complex and the whirl of colourful costumes was almost dizzying. The music seemed to be as frantic as the dancing and Catherine was awed at the energy being expended. The children were obviously enjoying themselves.

All went well until one of the small children caught a trailing end of her costume on one of the boy's jackets and stumbled. She fell onto the stage, caught herself with grace, but tripped up two other older children before they could stop.

The rest of the dancers immediately swarmed around them, many hands pulled them to their feet, and the whole pattern began again, as if the move had been planned.

That, thought Catherine, was even more amazing than the dance. She joined the audience in an appreciative clapping, in recognition.

The dancers shifted into a formal waltz, while the orchestra played a Viennese number. The dancing got faster and faster and morphed into a wild polka to an oompah number.

Suddenly the music stopped, and the dancers collapsed onto the floor in a circle, heads to the middle, as if their strings had been cut. They lay there for a few long moments, and then sat up, raised their hands and touched their toes. All were obviously panting slightly, but their faces were bright with happiness.

A wild round of applause sounded and the dancers stood up and bowed in two neat offset rows.

The curtain began to close and the dancers ran to the wings.

Cullen returned to centre stage and raised his bullhorn for attention.

"Ladies and gentlemen, our next act will be something truly special - a Valentine's Day fashion show. Will all the participants please prepare to put on your costumes - men please go backstage to my right and ladies to the left.

"There will be a 15 minute break while our couples prepare themselves."

He left the stage and the audience murmured in excitement.

Catherine and Vincent went to their respective sides. Catherine found Annabelle in attendance, with Elizabeth helping, passing out the costumes to each arrival. Catherine noticed that the backstage area had been divided in two by a curtain whose sides reached to the wings. It effectively prevented the two groups from seeing each other.

She shed her sweat suit and put on her dress, locating most of the snaps and hooks, except the ones on her back. She felt like a contortionist and was going to look for a mirror when she felt a pair of hands attach them for her. She sighed and looked around to thank her helper. Annabelle grinned at her and helped her adjust the headpiece, carefully threading her hair through it.

"At least your dress is in one piece," the dwarf remarked with a chuckle, her head indicating another dresser.

Catherine looked around and saw that Olivia seemed to be putting a multi-pastel coloured costume on in layers, each one shorter than the previous, and each with several hooks holding it together at the back. The effect was stunning. She looked, Catherine decided, like an exotic ice cream cone. She couldn't wait to see what Kanin would wear.

How would they decide which couple would appear, and in which order, she wondered as she wondered what to do now. Everyone else was in various stages of undress.

She moved slowly away from the hot crush of costumes and bodies and into the relative cool of the wings. She still couldn't see anything, but she found a chair to sit on while she awaited the next segment. She was soon joined by the other women, all of whom were restless in anticipation. Catherine stood up and the chair was moved out of the way by Annabelle.

Some signal must have been given, because she heard Cullen call for attention again, and sudden silence reign in the Hall.

"We will now begin our Valentine's Day fashion show. I know you're all eager to see what our couples have chosen to reflect their taste and imagination. To be fair to all, we have put each couple's names in this hat, and I will choose them blindly. They will enter the stage from opposite sides.

“Remember that this will be the first time they have seen the costumes of their loves. Will they be surprised? Shocked? Amused? We can be sure they won’t be disappointed.

“After each couple has modelled their outfits for us, they will stand at the back of the stage. It’s only fair that the others be permitted to see what they have created. Then we will ask them to dance a quadrille.”

Cullen moved to the back of the stage, out of the way and reached into his top hat.

“Olivia and Kanin,” he shouted, to a drum roll.

Olivia pushed through the press to the curtain gap and could be heard walking across the stage. There were gasps and oohs and aahs from the audience. Catherine found herself wishing desperately that she could see them, and judging by the movement around her, so did everyone else. She sighed.

“All in good time, my pretties,” whispered Annabelle with a chuckle.

So it went. One couple after another apparently thrilled the audience. Finally, Catherine heard her own and Vincent’s name called, and with relief, moved around the curtain and onto the stage. A glance at the line of bright costumes against the backdrop almost made her stumble. She was now very happy that she had purchased the theatre costumes. The joy on the faces of her tunnel friends was worth everything.

With an effort, she returned her gaze to the opposite side of the stage, where Vincent was emerging from the shadows.

She gasped in astonishment. He looked like a glam rocker! He wore a pair of tight silver pants, a dark electric blue jacket with silver edging and a bright red sweater. He also wore a glittery red belt that she was going to enjoy removing ... later.

Catherine met him in the middle of the stage and they both turned to the audience, hand-in-hand, before turning a pirouette separately. The audience clapped, obviously quite enjoying Vincent’s costume. Her own costume got appreciate looks from some of the men and she beamed at them.

Turning to the back of the stage, they walked to join the others and Catherine found her eyes overwhelmed by the range of colours and fashions. She and Vincent went to the far right side and stood beside Rebecca and Nathan.

Rebecca’s costume bore some resemblance to a glam Madonna outfit, Catherine decided, with bright blue tights, a gold lamé dress and a white feather boa. Nathan looked medieval in a Lincoln green tunic that reached his calves, a beautifully-embroidered tabard, and an exquisitely tooled, long leather belt tied in a knot on top of it. He wore chain mail on his legs, a pair of pointed embroidered slippers and a small crown.

Catherine looked at Vincent, who gazed at her with love.

“My winter flower,” he whispered.

“Glam,” she whispered back, eyeing the silver pants with hot eyes.

The fashion show continued for a few more couples and then Cullen re-emerged and raised his arms.

“We will now enjoy an impromptu quadrille. The couples will please form groups of four, facing into the centre of a square.

“Musicians prepare to play! We’ll give them a couple of minutes to decide on their strategy, and then I’ll give a start signal.”

Catherine and Vincent teamed up with three other couples and obediently formed a square. The group conferred in whispers.

“I think perhaps just going around in circles, as the children did, first of all,” Catherine suggested.

“Yes, then we can face each other across a square and just close in, move through and turn and do another circle,” Rebecca said.

The rest agreed and they returned to position, waiting for the signal. Catherine wished she had a video camera to record the dance.

When Cullen signalled, music began, a recorded piece that Catherine recognized, but had never thought to hear in the tunnel world. It was *Perpetuum Mobile* * by the Penguin Cafe Orchestra, a group she had discovered early in that fateful year, before her life had changed forever. She listened to it now with renewed pleasure, as they all moved to its gentle beat and beautiful trills. She had forgotten how much she loved it - and everything else done by that group. How had the tunnel world discovered it, she wondered.

Something must have shown on her face, because Vincent leaned down to whisper in her ear as they stood quietly a moment, before the next square movements.

“Peter.”

Catherine looked up at him and smiled. Of course! Peter had attended the same concert she had that New Year. He had probably purchased the CD as well. No doubt he had also provided the equipment they were now listening to, assisted, no doubt, by the ever-inventive Mouse to give it the necessary power.

The music ended on its abrupt note and the dancers stopped immediately, raising their hands over their heads to clap and then moved to the front of the stage to take a bow. The audience clapped madly and gave them a standing ovation.

Everyone bowed and Catherine realized she had never been so happy to have contributed. She felt made of air.

The couples left the stage and returned to the floor. Everyone helped to move the tables and chairs in preparation for the dinner. As soon as they were ready, everyone sat down. Despite a breakfast not so very long ago, Catherine found she had an appetite. She anticipated something special - and she was not disappointed.

Cullen returned to the stage, just as talk was becoming rowdy. “ATTENTION EVERYONE,” he bellowed through the bullhorn. “I wish to announce the results and winner of our little music contest.”

He held up a tally sheet and began read it, with some obvious satisfaction.

“Considering that nearly all of us have been listening to the medley being practiced for weeks now, and many of us have helped in one way or another, finding a winner was not easy. There were 41 entries ... 20 of which could not remember even five of the 13 pieces in the medley. We aren’t superstitious, are we? Five more got between six and nine correct, and 15 more contestants broke the 10 mark, but only one got them all correct. Friends, I’m very disappointed in you! That’s 35 eliminated. Now the last ones are very interesting. Four of the remaining entries managed to name 12 pieces correctly, but apparently did not hear the 13th.”

“Was that the fart?” someone yelled from the back. The resulting laughter cracked up the entire audience, and it was some time before Cullen could gain enough order to continue.

“Finally,” he continued, pausing to allow time for silence, “I’m pleased to announce that there are TWO winners. We’re sure they didn’t confer - we were watching carefully - but it IS a coincidence. This couple obviously has a fine ear for detail. Please rise - Rebecca and Nathan!”

There were screeches and hoots as the couple stood up and jointly raised their hands in a victory gesture. Cullen waved them forward and they joined him on the stage, bowing low in thanks. He gave them the basket and they returned to their table, wreathed in smiles, to the applause of everyone.

For the next hour or so, people mingled with their friends and speculated on what the lunch menu would be. No one knew because William kept his secrets well. When the dumbwaiter started to sound, though, there was an immediate muting of the noise and all eyes turned to the far end of the Hall. William had taken position at the opening in the wall, and a team of servers in white aprons stood ready

to take orders.

Meanwhile, taking this as their cue, a team of teenagers were quickly unloading trays of glasses, cutlery and much-washed napkins to the diners. Anticipation silenced any small talk. William was heard to give an order, and a continuous parade of plates made their way to the tables, almost like a bucket brigade, Catherine thought. When everyone was served, William rang a bell, and everyone dug in. The servers sat down at a table of their own, eager to eat as anyone.

To add to the special occasion, Cullen and Brooke were quietly pouring white wine into every glass. Catherine glanced at the bottle when it came to her, and realized it was a U-Brew label. She guessed that Peter had anticipated this event and provided for it. She must remember to thank him some special way.

The meal was delicious, as always - sliced chicken in a fragrant cranberry sauce, roast potatoes with a dash of hot seasoning, and peas combined with tiny white onions. When that was eaten with obvious gusto, everyone took a few minutes to savour and digest. The chatter became quite noisy, but quieted immediately when William entered carrying an enormous three-tiered red cake, decorated to distraction with candy hearts. He would trust no one else with this treat, and placed it on a table next to a stack of cake plates. He waved the cake knife around his head a few times, to laughter from the diners, then began to cut pieces and put them on plates. He passed them to the servers, who carried them to the diners.

The cake looked amazing, Catherine thought. It was a white cake inside, but with bright bits of colour. Candy sprinkles, she guessed. She had seen wedding cakes done this way. She took a bite and found that the cake was even better than it looked. It was lemon with a little cinnamon, and the slight tartness and rich spice gave it a depth that made her mouth water for more. She looked at where William waited by the cake, obviously enjoying the reactions, and stood up. Vincent stood up next to her and shouted "SILENCE!"

Wow, thought Catherine. She'd had no idea his voice could carry so well. It was effective. Everyone looked up and were silent.

Catherine cleared her throat. "I'm sure I speak for everyone when I praise our extraordinary cook, William. May he find all he wishes in his kitchen, and enjoy a restful evening! Let's give him a round of applause!"

He got more than that as everyone stood up and clapped wildly. There was a deep boom, and everyone looked to the stage. Eric had manhandled out his tuba and began giving an energetic rendition of "*For He's a Jolly Good Fellow*". The effort, while perfectly-rendered was also highly amusing, since Eric could not hope to play except in a slow tempo. The singers had to slow down, so as not to pass him by. There was soon more laughter than singing. Eric ceased playing, and received a hearty round of applause. He was smiling, and bowed to everyone.

Father rapped the edge of his cane on the side of the table for attention.

"Thank you, Eric," he shouted. "I can't think of a better instrument with which to fete our William. May they both blow hard, but produce nothing that is not good."

There was a gust of wild laughter at this and everyone sat down.

William, his face wreathed in smiles, looked around and spoke.

"There's still plenty of cake left, if anyone wants seconds ..."

Hands went up all around the tables.

"But I've made a special treat you might want to enjoy first. The cake will keep, these will not. He looked to the end of the Hall and everyone saw two mountains approach, carried aloft by Geoffrey and Kipper. As they got closer, Catherine realized they were cream puffs, and her mouth watered. She looked at Vincent and saw him regarding the moving platters with great intensity. They were his favourite dessert.

The platters quickly made the rounds, everyone getting two of the treats. Vincent almost inhaled his, but Catherine tried to savour hers. She was not completely successful and ended up eating the last half in one bite. She closed her eyes and sighed happily. She turned to Vincent and he kissed her with relish, tasting the remnants of the sweet cream on her lips. He was incorrigible - but delightful - she decided.

A few people rose and wandered over to the cake table, wanting seconds. A team of children quickly cleared the soiled plates and other items from the tables into rolling carts with huge tubs on them. As each table was wiped clean, they were moved and stacked at the side of the Hall, clearing a space for dancing.

Catherine looked at Vincent and saw that he had other plans. The dancing was, after all, chiefly for those of the community who were unattached. It was assumed that the couples would find their own amusements, now that the main events were finished.

They walked over to Father and said their good-byes. He smiled at them.

"I think of all the costumes, Vincent, yours surprised me the most. I had no idea you had a streak of ... rock star ... in you."

Vincent smiled and bowed, tightening his hold on Catherine's hand.

"Father, I did not know either. Catherine has been responsible for my present state of mind. I seem to have left my chrysalis and turned into not a butterfly, perhaps, but something other than what I was."

Catherine chuckled. "My love, you had this in you always. I can't take credit for the costume. I suspect Annabelle had a hand in it's choice."

"Yes," Vincent admitted. "Left to myself, I would probably have chosen something more ... knightly."

"Nevertheless, Vincent, you look ... astonishing" Father had obviously struggled to find a suitable word.

"No adjective could describe how I feel today," Vincent remarked softly. "This costume is only the outer shell. My heart is full of joy - and I want to share this with Catherine ... alone."

"Of course you do," Father smiled benevolently. "Enjoy your evening."

The couple left, following others up the back stairs, so they would not have to fight the windy stone steps. They emerged into a small alcove in William's kitchen, next to the latched door of the shaft housing the dumbwaiter Mouse had devised to transport the food to the Great Hall and haul the dirty dishes from it. Those last would be washed by the children, and the sinks were already full and the work underway as they passed through the kitchen.

There were many exchanged wishes for a happy evening as the couples went their separate ways.

Vincent and Catherine were happy to arrive in his chamber. He let down the privacy rug, turned up the brazier, then sat beside Catherine as she plumped herself on the edge of the bed. The chamber was quite warm, already. Catherine was sure she would not have been cold, no matter what the ambient temperature. His presence always warmed her.

"Wow," she remarked at last. "I've never felt so tired and exhilarated."

"I too. It has been a wonderful day," Vincent agreed, and leaned over to kiss her. She lifted her head and their kiss went on for some time. It seemed like ages since they had shared one.

They both sighed.

"I believe I am ready for something that does not involve standing," Catherine stated softly.

"Indeed?" Vincent looked at her, needing no great leap of faith to understand her intent.

"But first you'll have to help me get out of this outfit," Catherine told him, standing up.

Vincent looked at the costume, up, down and sideways, but nothing he recognized as a fastener.

"Where should I begin?" he asked at last.

Catherine chuckled, and showed him where the hooks and eyes were hidden, while undoing the ones

she could reach. The dress fell to the floor. She removed her flower headdress and carefully picked up the pieces and draped them over a chair. Then she turned to regard Vincent, who hadn't moved and was regarding her with hot eyes.

"Your turn. Let me," she requested huskily. He stood still while she removed his jacket, enjoying the gasp he heard from her as she regarded his "sweater". The plush red garment was sleeveless, and his muscled arms made her want to rip the rest of his clothes off. However she took time to enjoy the sight, and smiled up at him.

"Father was right, Vincent. You are astonishing! I think I'll take that belt off next ..."

She found the place where it was clasped in front, taking the opportunity to stroke, just a little, as she removed it. She placed it on the chair.

"Now I want to examine those silver pants ..."

She put her hand gently against his crotch and was rewarded with a response that made her core catch fire.

Vincent shifted a little, and his eyes burned into her own when she caught them, but he said nothing. His silence, though, spoke volumes, as it always did, she reflected.

Catherine sighed gustily, wondering if she could continue this game much longer. She looked at the shirt and thought perhaps that should come off next. She walked around him and looked at the back. The sweater had a short neck zipper which she lowered. Vincent took that as permission and pulled it over his head and placed it over the jacket, without moving his feet. He shook out his hair and straightened it with his fingers. The ripples of his back muscles as he did so made Catherine suddenly gasp for lack of air. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes for a moment, trying to regain her composure.

Returning to stand in front of him, Catherine decided she couldn't resist any longer. She pressed herself against his firm body, loving the feel of the silver lamé on her naked body - and more to the point, what it hid. She reached around the waistband and realized that the pants were stretchy, and would remove easily. She winkled them down to his hips and he obligingly bent to shift them down and stepped out of them.

Now completely revealed to her hungry eyes - Vincent seldom wore underwear - Catherine hugged him as close as she could, feeling his manhood pressing against her stomach.

"Now?" she asked, looking up at him.

Vincent bent down to give her a passionate kiss.

"Yes," he said simply. He flung back the covers on the bed, then lifted her up, carefully placing her in the centre and easing himself next to her.

There was no more talk for some time and the curtain effectively prevented any of sounds from reaching the rest of the tunnel community. Not that anyone was listening, Catherine decided, when they were sated and lay cuddled in each other's arms. They drifted into a nap, content, and needing nothing more on this perfect day.

END

Note: Perpetuum Mobile was release by the Penguin Cafe Orchestra in 1987. It has continued to be very popular, used as radio and TV series themes and as incidental music in several movies. There are several versions of it on YouTube:

<http://youtu.be/VDMcvG6kmHg> - with digital imagery

<http://youtu.be/FvbCV6E0Wro> - live by the PCO.