

Futures

Ring in the new

Upholding traditions. **By Deborah Walker**



ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

“But, Professor, it’s the New Year’s tradition.”

“Forget about it. We have too many traditions. The Day of the Crash. The Finding of Water. The Discovery of the Edibles.”

“Traditions bind us together as a colony. You taught me that.” Miriam, our fearless leader, smiles as she plays her best card. “And besides, you made this tradition.”

It’s true. Ringing in the New Year was something I remembered from Earth.

“And I don’t want you holed up in the lab day after day, night after night.”

I plead science. “The comet’s getting closer. I’m pretty sure it will disrupt the atmosphere. I’ll be able to get the SOS out.”

Miriam’s diplomatic, I’ll give her that. “Yes, of course.” She doesn’t mention the countless other times I’ve told her I could get a signal out. But *this* time, *this* time, I’m close enough to taste it.

“The youngsters will be upset if you don’t

attend the New Year’s Bean Feast.”

“Am I that old, that I’ve become tradition?”

She grinned. “You and me both, Professor.”

Which is why I’m here, staring at the blinking bean in my edibles pudding.

“It’s the Prof!!” they laugh. “The Prof’s got the token.” A cheer rings out. In my curmudgeonly soul a little light flickers. They like me. They really do like me.

So, it’s me who has to cross the ice desert to the site of the crash. Me, who has to ring in the New Year.

A cold coming I had of it. Just the worst time of year for a journey, and such a journey. I watch the comet overhead. I’m sure it will cut through the atmospheric blanket that stops me getting the signal out. I step a little faster. The sooner I’m back the better.

Stupid tradition.

The crash in all its ruined elegance, shadowed by the light of the comet. Gleaming. I remember when it was something not ruined. I remember it when it was young. Full of piss and

vinegar. Full of potential. Full of hope.

I see the ship’s bell, cast iron, some connection to the captain, I seem to recall. Did it ring over her village? Well, now it will ring over her bones. She was a good captain. At the end, she steered the ship manually. Can you imagine? Such guts, she had, to take hold of the ship herself, to take hold of the lives of all of us. To say: I know better than the artificial steer. I can get my people through this. And she did. But not herself. God bless.

I wipe a tear from my eye. Good Lord, am I getting sentimental in my old age?

Old age. There’s no hormonal therapy here, although I could whip some up, I suppose. On Earth I’d be in my prime. I wonder how that would feel. Is there something artificial about extended life? Like the soulers say? The chance to find out would be a fine thing.

Quick. Get the bell rung. Ring out the old, get rid of these maudlin thoughts. And get cracking on solving the problem of getting an SOS through the atmospheric blanket.

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The comet is sparkling in the air. It's my contention that the tail of the comet will interact with the atmospheric exotics and open a window through the barrier. But my calculations are wrong. The comet is too near, too soon. It is shining, the sky is lit up like a Christmas tree. No. The sky is blazing like fire, yellow and red and white hot at the core.

The exotics are burning. I imagine the colony rejoicing. They will make a new tradition about this. They will build stories about this. For a moment, even I stand and marvel. But I have no time to wonder. I should be home. I half-turn to leave. I should be in the lab. I should be trying to get that damn signal through the blanket. I should be ...

I should be ringing the bell. I was chosen. And even if it means nothing to me, it means something to them. And I am part of them, and I was chosen.

I quick-step it to the bell, under the blazing sky.

Ring out the old, ring in the new.

I hear a cheer carrying over the cold desert, past the three desiccated trees. I hear that cheer in the cold under the blazing sky, and I am warmed a little. My old bones warmed.

And then ...

The old signal box. The signal box that I thought was broken. It's active. Numbers streaming like binary flame. It's connecting. It's working. I lunge towards the box. My fingers

flying over the keys.

I code the SOS. Tears pouring down my face. I send my signal home. If I hadn't been here at this very moment ... I was the only one who would have been able to get the signal out. I am sure of that. I was *meant* to be here. I look at the comet overhead. My face is wet. I *am* a sentimental old fool.

I ring the bell again and again and again.

The cheer goes out.

After years of biography complaining about her distracting children, empty nester **Deborah** is missing them terribly.

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Deborah Walker reveals the inspiration behind *Ring in the new*.

In September, a writer's thoughts turn to Christmas, and I thought I'd like to write a seasonal story for *Nature's Futures*. I noodled around with four stories. *Ring in the new* was the one that had legs. The other three were abandoned. Although, now that I'm thinking about it, I feel a pang of regret for the three lost stories.

I'd just finished rereading Terry Pratchett's *Hogfather*, so my imagination was swirling with the themes of tradition and myth creation. I liked the sense of tradition building up over the centuries in *Hogfather*. The colonists are quick to build their own traditions. The professor finds the electronic bean in her dish of edibles and that marks her as the chosen one that evening. And I particularly like the idea of 'edibles' in my story. They don't sound very appetising, do they?

As I sometimes do, I sought out poetry to kickstart my imagination. Poetry can be a condensed source of ideas, imagery and emotion for my writing.

This story is inspired by two poems: 'Journey of the Magi' by T. S. Eliot and 'Ring Out, Wild Bells' by Alfred, Lord Tennyson. I remember hearing 'Journey of the Magi' at a school Christmas assembly, and it's stuck with me all these years.

'Ring Out, Wild Bells' gave me the colonists' tradition of sounding the bell, to bring in the good and ring out the bad. 'Journey of the Magi' reinforced the imagery of a long, hard journey following the star, searching for something.

And most of all, I wanted a hopeful story for the New Year.

