

Resolutions

by Lynne C.

Rating: PG-13

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Setting/Spoilers: post-*Destiny* (AtS 5.8)

Summary: Holiday songfic ~ Spike ruminates on the new year.

Acknowledgements: Response to PJzallday's Christmas songfic challenge at We Band of Buggered (PJ: <http://members.shaw.ca/pjzallday/Main.htm> and WeBoB: http://tv.groups.yahoo.com/group/We_Band_of_Buggered/)

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Spike stopped in the doorway as the smell of the place assailed him and his sense revolted. He tried to shake off the distaste that had come over him, but to no avail. He just couldn't go in there. He turned and found himself back on the street corner with nowhere to go.

He'd have to face it. He'd drunk just about as much alcohol, in as many different establishments, as any one vampire could do. A difficult record to achieve, but one to which Spike had always believed himself equal.

He couldn't have said for certain if it was the stale smell of beer on floors that had gone too long unmopped, or if it was the undertones of desolation and despair that had at last proven too much for him. But tonight, he just didn't feel like getting pissed. His weeks-long celebratory bender, since the day he was zapped back to a solid being and beat Angel to a pulp (and vice-versa), was officially at an end.

*Happy New Year!* he thought ruefully.

Maybe that was it...generally, the other tavern patrons didn't have much of an effect on him, but on the eve of 2004, well, those looking forward to the future were at parties with friends, or at home with their families. The dives played host to the rest, and their depression must be contagious.

He began walking aimlessly. If he wasn't going to get hammered, what exactly *was* he going to do? He could go kill something...but he just didn't seem to have the passion for hunting just now, either.

Spike ambled towards the center of the city, with no particular goal, but determined to find something entertaining to do in the waning hours of the year. He let his thoughts drift as his feet went their own way, and in the midst of pondering where his old buddy Clem might have landed, he looked up to find himself across the street from Union Station.

With nothing better to do, he went inside. Spike had always enjoyed the randomness of mass transit ~ get on a train and bask in the ever-changing kaleidoscope of humanity passing before one's eyes. Ultimately, it became new again with every stop and start. The enjoyment of this pastime hadn't been entirely dependent upon predation, though it certainly had been a great smorgasbord on rails. Recollection of his final fight with Nikki Wood gave him a pang, as competing waves of nostalgic fondness and revulsion buffeted him.

*Bloody conscience!* Mostly, he'd accommodated the shame and regret that the sol had conferred upon the past century's actions. But occasionally, the conflict between his natures still took him by surprise. But he shook it off and boarded the nearest train car.

*Bugger all!* Within a short space of time, Spike was second-guessing the whim that had him swaying along the metro tracks. *Can' nothin' be easy nor accordin' t'plan...* It seemed that plenty of people were getting on the train, but almost none getting off, and the car was growing crowded. The already-ensconced passengers were jostled closer together as each new wave of travelers entered the sliding doors, and Spike rolled his eyes as he heard himself giving up his seat to a pregnant woman who was clinging to an overhead rail nearby. *Never live't down if anyone 'at knows me caught me bein' mannerly.*

After giving it a bit of consideration, he decided that they were traveling roughly north. *Where'n hell's everyone goin'?*

He observed that many people were carrying blankets and folding chairs, and as the doors opened and the mass of humanity began to de-train, he realized what he'd done. He couldn't help but laugh, and let himself be swept out with the tide onto the station platform in Pasadena. Noting that his reputation was sinking fast, he nonetheless let curiosity carry him in the direction where the crowd was gathering to claim spots along the Rose Parade route.

However, when he reached the streets where the folding chairs were being set up, and individuals and family groups were making themselves comfortable, opening their backpacks and sharing coolers and bags of snacks, the aimless wandering that had brought him to the metro resumed. It was not like he had a destination here.

Back at the crappy bar in LA, he'd felt quite superior to the denizens, for no apparent reason, as he clearly didn't have anything much about which to brag. Except, perhaps, the small degree pride that had made him leave. But here, with people laughing and chatting, he felt very alone in the world, and his spirits plummeted.

He was seriously contemplating turning back around, finding the VERY worst drinking establishment possible, and getting two or three times as drunk as he'd ever done before, when a hand lightly touched the elbow of his duster, and he turned to find himself being regarded by a short, round-ish lady, probably in her mid-40's.

"Are you looking for your friends? It gets a little crazy out here..."

"Nah, 'm here by m'self."

"I see. Well, you're welcome to join me. My sister and her family were supposed to be out here with me, but I just got a call that one of the little ones has caught a bug, and they're staying home. So, I have a couple of extra chairs, and a lot of food...."

Spike looked at her suspiciously. Since when did strange motherly-types invite him to partake of their hospitality based on...nothing, really? *Oh, yeah...guess I must have a vibe ~ an' not the one I've tried t' cultivate.* Thoughts of Joyce brought with them the familiar hint of a tingle behind his eyes. It had been a long time since anyone had cared enough to try and make everything better with hot chocolate and mini marshmallows.

"You sure?"

“Yeah, you looked lost, so if you’re not physically looking for someone, you could probably use some company. And it happens that I love the parade, but I don’t look forward to sitting here all night by myself.”

“You know, s’not safe t’be cozenin’ up t’strangers.”

“In this big crowd, full of witnesses? How much harm could someone really do?”

“You’d be surprised,” he muttered, not quite under his breath.

She arched her eyebrow at him, but continued as if she hadn’t heard, “Besides, my gut tells me you’re okay. Cheesy puff?” She’d settled herself back into her chair on the sidewalk, perhaps three rows back from the curb, and was now handing him a bag of the crunchy, toxic-orange treats.

Spike laughed in spite of himself at her matter-of-fact manner, and sprawled into the chair nearest her.

“I’m Martha, but everyone calls me ‘Em’. My mother was named Martha, too, so to prevent confusion, we just went with the initial. I thought it was too boring, so decided at some point in the fourth grade to spell it out.” She’d stuck her hand out to him in the midst of this explanation, and he found himself at a loss as they shook. Real introductions just weren’t a ‘Spike’ thing to do.

“Everyone calls me Spike...but, I was born William,” he finally hedged.

“William...that means protector. Guess I was right about you, eh?” She chuckled, and her eyes crinkled up pleasantly.

“Don’ know’s I embody that too well. But, you can call me whatever you like...’S a party, right?” An edge of cynicism had crept into his voice, though he was attempting to be off-the-cuff with his remarks.

She regarded him closely for a moment, but said nothing. Finally, she turned to the portable radio she had sitting at her feet, and turned the volume up a bit.

“My station’s doing some count-down or other of songs...I can’t keep track of what the categories are -- ‘Best Songs of All Time’, ‘Most Requested Holiday Songs’, whatever. But the oldies take me back, so I like having it in the background.”

Em rattled on for a bit about her life, and Spike learned that she had lived in the LA area all her life, and every two or three of those years, her family had come out to see the parade, always making an event of it, staying out on the street all night. She reminisced about the years when it had rained and they had hidden inside pup tents, shivering and singing songs and telling stories to pass the time. And the time that her eight-year-old sister had wandered away, and they’d had a panicky scramble up and down the street, only to find her cheerfully looking for them from the privileged vantage spot behind a mounted police officer.

As Em’s stories continued, Spike idly crunched on some barbeque-flavored corn nuts that she had fished out of one of her bags of goodies. He made occasional comments as seemed

appropriate, though he was anything but riveted by her narrative. He listened with a passive corner of his mind, while his thoughts wandered off on tangents to the subjects of her speech.

It wasn't that she talked incessantly...she'd seem to reach the logical end of a line of conversation and then wait for the next to strike her. Sometimes a song on the radio would catch her attention, and she'd sit and listen, or sing or hum along. But she seemed not to mind his failure to contribute, or really keep up his end of the chatter in any meaningful way. *Livin' alone, she must fancy any bloke who'll hold still long enough t'listen.*

She had begun telling him about how she'd met her late husband when the plaintive opening notes to a song both familiar and long-forgotten filtered into his consciousness:

*Met my old lover in the grocery store  
The snow was falling Christmas Eve  
I stole behind her in the frozen foods  
And I touched her on the sleeve*

*She didn't recognize the face at first  
But then her eyes flew open wide  
She went to hug me and she spilled her purse  
And we laughed until we cried.*

*We took her groceries to the checkout stand  
The food was totalled up and bagged  
We stood there lost in our embarrassment  
As the conversation dragged.*

*We went to have ourselves a drink or two  
But couldn't find an open bar  
We bought a six-pack at the liquor store  
And we drank it in her car.*

*We drank a toast to innocence  
We drank a toast to now  
And tried to reach beyond the emptiness  
But neither one knew how.*

*She said she'd married her an architect  
Who kept her warm and safe and dry  
She would have liked to say she loved the man  
But she didn't like to lie.*

*I said the years had been a friend to her  
And that her eyes were still as blue  
But in those eyes I wasn't sure if  
I saw doubt or gratitude.*

*She said she saw me in the record stores  
And that I must be doing well  
I said the audience was heavenly  
But the traveling was hell.*

*We drank a toast to innocence  
We drank a toast to now  
And tried to reach beyond the emptiness  
But neither one knew how.*

*We drank a toast to innocence  
We drank a toast to time  
Reliving in our eloquence  
Another 'auld lang syne'...*

*The beer was empty and our tongues were tired  
And running out of things to say*

*She gave a kiss to me as I got out  
And I watched her drive away.  
Just for a moment I was back at school  
And felt that old familiar pain  
And as I turned to make my way back home  
The snow turned into rain –*

He thought back on some of his recent Auld Lang Synes...

The first year he'd been in Sunnydale came to mind. Not that he and Dru had particularly celebrated the changing of the calendar. Another twelve months come and gone in an immortal existence were a pittance scarcely worth notice. But the new year would have fallen after Drusilla's healing in the Du Lac Ritual, and while he, himself, was unfortunately incapacitated by way of organ collapse. He recalled that it had been to compensate for his invalid status that he'd conceived the idea of assembling The Judge for Dru's amusement. *Bloody fool thing...hurried up Angelus' return, which changed everythin'*. Not that he'd wish it otherwise now, with the benefit of hindsight. Still, he marveled at the long chain of cause and effect that had been set up, culminating in his present position. *'F'only 'twas as obvious what happens next...*

Three years later he remembered vividly...Buffy was living back at home while Joyce was recovering...or so they'd thought...and had the Scoobies in for a celebration. It was low key, what with the Nibblem there and Captain Cardboard recently departed town. He'd observed from outside, yearning to be near her, and hating that he'd let himself be such a slave to his emotions. But slave he was, so he alternately stood or sat in the shadows, wondering what it would be like to be welcomed inside.

Last year, of course, he'd been only vaguely conscious of the passage of time, whilst being taunted by The First, and pummeled at will by its Turok-Han minion. *What that 'real' vampire had in strength, it more than made up for in daft...tryin' to drown a non-breathin' thing like me!* Weeks had passed before Buffy had come for him...

*'Course, Buffy came for me year before that, too, mor'n once....Had a right raunchy good time that night, an' into the wee smalls.* He recalled wistfully how, when he had finally tired her out sufficiently that she'd slept, he'd lain awake watching her, and whispered to her all the endearments that were clearly forbidden in their deeply disturbed new relationship. He sighed at the memory, and realized that Em had fallen silent and was now looking at him quizzically as he sat preoccupied with his own thoughts.

“So, I've been trying to be polite over here, and not ask what your story is, wandering around down here without any company, and ready to be taken in by a stranger, sitting and brooding like –“

Spike cut her off, deeply insulted, before she could finish, “I. don'. brood!”

“—you are.” she continued.

The offended vampire attempted to defend his demeanor, “S not broodin' to sit an' take stock o'things at the turn o'the year.”

Em didn't seem to be buying it, as she crossed her arms, and continued to probe him with her eyes. He shifted his position under her scrutiny, but was unable to comfortably ignore her, and

found himself floundering to explain away his indifference to the festive atmosphere. “ ‘S just I’m not one for holidays much...out for a walk, I was, an’ ended up ‘ere...” It sounded weak even to him, but, it was the best he was coming up with.

“So, there’s a girl that’s not with you that you’re missing. I’m still trying to figure out if she dumped you, or if she’s just not here in town....”

*‘F all the human and demonic livin’ things there are, Spike reflected, Women’re the **most** mysterious.* “ ‘Ow can yeh tell?”

“Well, you just have this air of melancholy nostalgia about you...love trouble seemed the most likely reason. You wanna tell me about it? I’m pretty non-judgmental...”

Spike hesitated for long moments, thinking about whether it was too great a can of worms to open. He decided that with sufficient editing, and judicious selection of his words...

“Well, she did tell me to shove off me a couple of years ago, turned out for the right reasons. But I made some changes what needed makin’, ‘n’ we were gettin’ to a better place, maybe coulda made it work...but, er...” he thought for a moment, “work took us to different places an’ we’ve been outta touch for a bit now. Been workin’ out how t’change that, but...”

The words hung there as Spike searched for what came next. Leaning forward with his forearms on his knees, and his fingertips making a pyramid, he finally concluded, “ ‘s jus’ always been real complicated.”

“Do you love her?”

“Mor’n jus’ ‘bout anythin’.”

“She love you?” He shook his head and laughed softly at that.

“Not sure. Not sure she’s ever been sure one way or t’other....”

“Eh, those are the tricky ones...when one person’s feelings are different than the other’s.”

“No kiddin’.”

“So, what’s she like?”

He was taken aback at that. He’d expected some sage and well-intentioned, but wildly inappropriate advice. She really was non-judgmental. *Rare bird*, Spike thought approvingly. He sat back in his chair again before answering.

“Mess o’contradictions, that one. Faced more troubles in th’ last few years than anyone should in a set o’ lifetimes. Built up this hard shell, tryin’ to keep the hurt away. Other folks didn’ always see ‘at was what she was doin’. But I’d look in ‘er great green eyes, an’ I could see all the fear and pain hidin’ away inside. An’ when I could make that go away for a bit, that was good....”

Em nodded as he spoke, smiling kindly at his heartfelt words.

“An’ in the big stuff, she was as unselfish as they come. And beautiful...like a warm summer day...She – I’m in awe of her.”

She reached towards him and gave his hand a squeeze at that, and they sat quietly for some time, until a commotion along the street made Em look at her watch and exclaim that the new year was just a few minutes away. She busied herself opening the champagne she'd packed, and soon Spike found himself grudgingly joining her in the final countdown to 2004.

As cheers of "Happy New Year" went up from the assembled crowd, and noisemakers backed a woefully off-key rendition of Robbie Burns' classic song, Spike swallowed down the proffered bubbly. *Who knows...things might look up...there's always that buggerin' Shanshu to take from Peaches, 'r at least to goad 'im with...that's a year's worth of inspiration right there!*

He allowed the group jocularly to carry him along, and he and Em joked and chatted, and flirted a bit – Spike wondered why she'd never remarried; she struck him as a good sort of gal to share a roof with – until the champagne had her dozing in her lawn chair. He tucked her blanket closer around her and regretfully wished her a silent farewell. It was better not to have to explain his departure ahead of the sunrise, so under cover of her slumber, he made his way back to the MTA station and boarded a tram back to Union Station.

As the near-empty train car clattered along, Spike speculated whether he and Buffy would one day meet again like the couple in Fogelberg's song...virtual strangers thrown together incidentally, with just a tiny, if significant, sliver of their life's events binding them together. Would they find that beyond that bond, they'd have little else, save uncomfortable silence and regrets and "might have beens" between them?

*'At's a pansy-arsed way to take it, Spike – jus' waitin' ta turn into some pop song.* Musing about the pathetic-case scenario had made up his mind. When Wolfram & Hart reopened, he'd go and say his farewells, and set out to find his girl.

Decision made, he smiled at the tipsy couple riding at the end of the car who had stopped their snogging long enough to take a breath and sing another chorus of Auld Lang Syne. This time, Spike whistled along.



Happy New Year!