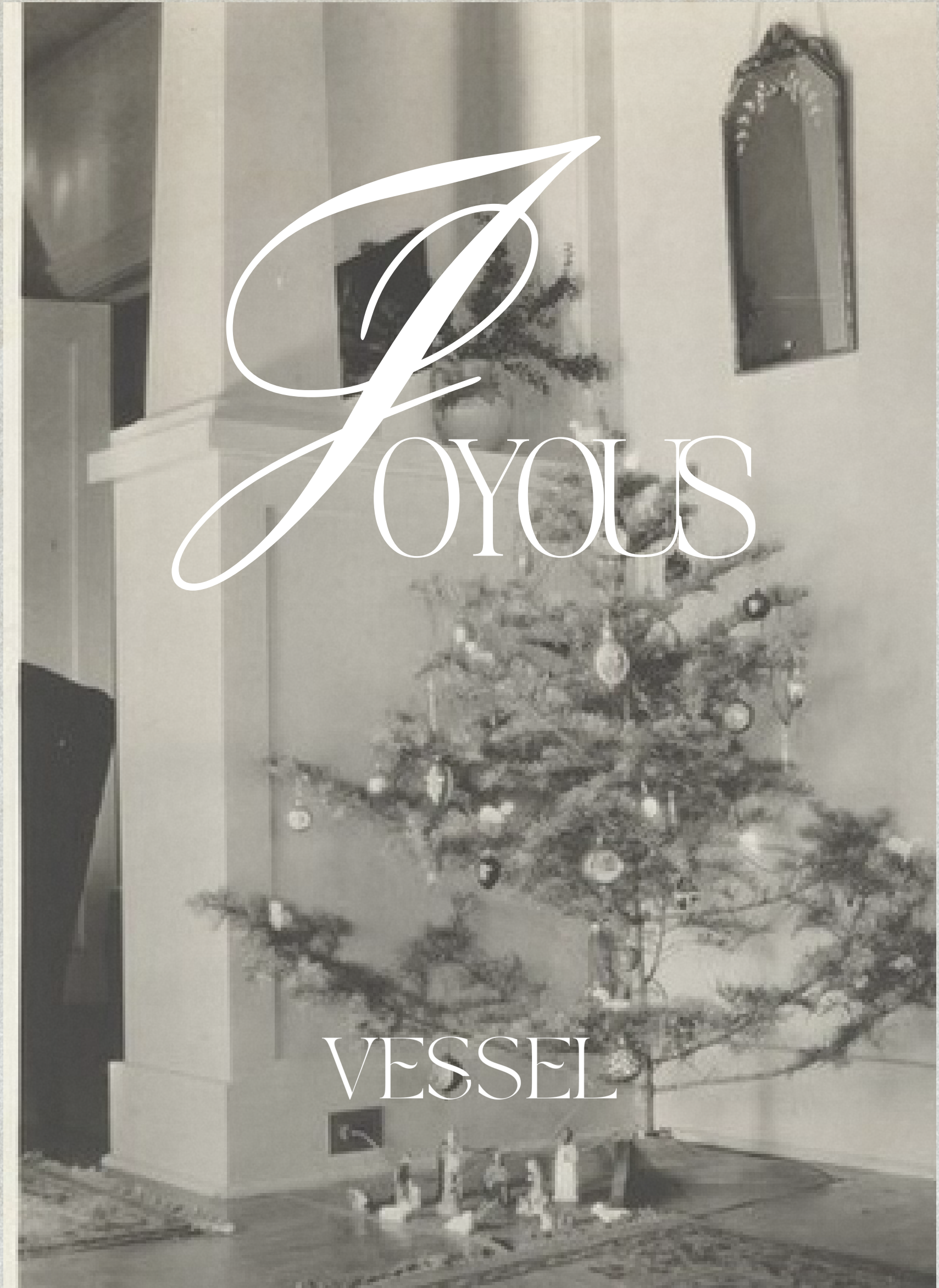


*The Most Wonderful Time of the Year*

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CHRISTMAS

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There is a feeling that many of us are familiar with. It's that feeling when the first snow falls over night. You wake up to a fluffy, white blanket of snow covering everything in sight. It's that feeling when someone you love is getting ready to open the gift you've anticipated giving them. It's the feeling when we laugh and bake cookies with friends. It's when the whole family gathers in, to reminisce of old as stories are told. It's that look on my grandmother's face when the whole family is laughing together and creating heart felt memories. The feeling is similar to happiness, but it's more than that. It's a joyous feeling. It's the kind of joy that truly makes your heart glad. Happiness comes and goes, but joy stays in your heart long after the moment is gone.

Joy is a feeling your soul knows.

The word 'joy' or 'joyous' is threaded throughout the entire Christmas season. You can feel it in the air. You hear it in the carols. People are kinder. They're more generous and thoughtful. How is it that simple traditions can revive instant joy? There is a kind of security that comes with tradition. It's not so much the tradition that we're adamant about as it is the warmth we are filled with when practicing those traditions. The whole world lights up throughout the month of December. Then soon after Christmas Day, the sleigh bells stop ringing, the parties have ended, the tree is put away, and our family members are traveling home. We're thrown into a winter without lights.

Growing up near Indianapolis made for a cold winter, a winter that seemingly lasted until May. I remember wanting that warm Christmassy feeling to last, even though it was over. I didn't want winter without lights. Somehow, I hyped myself up with the thought of there at least being snow. At least I could go sledding and I still had the hope of it snowing a few feet, resulting in a snow day away from school. My mother helped to pull out that warm feeling in our home. The tree may have been put away, but our home had a lot of lamps which aided in creating an ambient atmosphere. She would still bake cookies and light the new candles my siblings and I bought her for Christmas. This gave me hope as a little girl and even as a woman today. I began to realize that warm atmospheres can be created regardless if there's a holiday or not. Even now, when there's a thunderstorm on the forecast, I get excited challenging myself with how cozy I can make that day for my loved ones. The gloomier, the cozier.

Life can be this way. It is made up of seasons, each ebb and flow carry us into tomorrow. During the evening's darkest hour, the sun is shining beams somewhere. I've learned to trust this. In the moments I feel weak, strength is there. In the moments I feel lost, hope is there. In the moments I feel anxious, peace is there. When I feel sorrow, joy is there. It comes in the morning and in times when it feels like it shouldn't be there, but somehow it is.

This is how joy works. Something like Christmas comes along in the middle of winter, reviving wonders of joy. We find hope. At times when peace can't be found, it settles upon us. One once said, "peace like a river." It turns, rushes, and sometimes overcomes us. You learn to float, when you can't swim. You learn to swim, when you should have drowned. You learn to have joy. This joy is more than a beautiful, winters day. It's an inward joy. It's something that can be had in every season of life. When in your heart, you choose joy it will always be found.

## VESSEL