

Jingles and Her Journey

By John Meadows

It was yet another Christmas, and Jingles watched her humans being very busy around the house, fully engaged in their mysterious holiday preparations. One of the older humans, the often cranky one with no hair, had gotten out the box of shiny bright decorations that soon would be hung on the Christmas tree, but while he was emptying the box, one of the objects fell on the floor; the older human made the sounds that Jingles knew meant he was angry.

Jingles watched as the object, a round ball filled with the reflections of a house decorated for Christmas, rolled along the floor as the human, still making noises, gave chase. Jingles had memories of past years, when she would have leapt up and started chasing the ball as it rolled around the floor; she would be the fierce predator, and the ball would be her prey. But now, she just watched as the object meandered along the wood grain of the slightly uneven floor, seemingly unsure of which path to follow, until it ended up in front of where Jingles was lying before the fireplace. Jingles remembered triumphant pounces from previous years, the pounces that would have angered her humans even more, and made the game even more fun.

As a young cat Christmas for Jingles meant being at the centre of attention and being in the middle of all the activity, even if she didn't understand everything that was going on. In a way, that made it even more fun; she could turn any human activity into a game for a cat.

This year was different though; it was a Christmas of sleeping by the fire, and looking out the window into a forest in the middle of its snow-blanketed slumber, with every gentle snowflake a call to a long rest. For Jingles, each day was a series of long rests; the energy of her remembered youth was gone, like every Christmas tree of years past. To get up from the fire, to walk slowly over to her food bowl was an effort, an effort that had not been there before. Years of comforting sameness were changing, turning.

The older human bent down and picked up the shiny object, giving Jingles a pet and a lovely scratch behind her ears as he had so often in the past. At least some things weren't changing.

It was later in the evening the same day; Jingles had nibbled a bit at her food; her food bowl had been placed by her humans close to where she lay in front of the fire. Her humans were sleeping (she had never figured out why her humans always wasted the best parts of the night!) The fire had burned down to embers, but every now and then a stray flame would throw a flickering shadow on the warm wood grain of the walls. These were shadows she had seen many times before, but since they involved neither food, nor play, nor attention from her humans she really hadn't paid too much attention to them. But tonight they seemed different.

The shadows seemed playfully furtive; she would catch one in the corner of her eye, but when she turned to look the flame would die down and the shadow would disappear. It seemed to Jingles there was a shape to the shadows; was that a tail she saw, the random twitch of a pointed ear or two? The fire occasionally crackled as it continued to die down; Jingles would hear sharp snaps, but also an echo, and in the echo if she strained she thought she could hear other sounds; was that a distant purr she was hearing?

Her wondering continued until Jingles fell asleep and dreamed. But this was no ordinary sleep, nor any ordinary dream. Having spent most of her life in catnaps of one kind or another, Jingles was quite certain that she was an expert on sleep in all its forms, but this was a sleep like no other. This was no catnap that could be interrupted by the promise of food or play, or even the random creak of one of her humans walking by on the wooden floor. This was a deep sleep, deeper than any she could recall.

The dream was not one of sight, but of sounds, smells and touch. And there was no light. Jingles had always prided herself on being able to see in the dark, and it was sometimes amusing to see her humans stumble around bumping into things in the middle of the night when she could still see everything perfectly clearly. The lack of sight should have been terrifying but somehow it wasn't.

She felt herself curled up with what must have been some other cats. She couldn't see them, but the sound, the smells and the touch gave it away. And the sounds they made were not those of grown cats, but of kittens. She and the other kittens were curled up against what must have been a larger cat. Jingles was surrounded by the sound of purring; it was like a comforting blanket, and it was her entire world.

It never took much to get you to purr Jingles heard a voice in her head say. *You were always such a happy kitten.*

Jingles realized she was hearing, well not exactly hearing, but sensing the voice of her mother. How long had it been since she had even thought about her mother? The memories had faded along with her kittenhood. Could she even picture what her mother looked like?

With that the dream ended, but not suddenly; not like one of her catnaps where her light sleep would be interrupted by the promise of food or fun and she would be instantly awake. This dream was fading slowly, dissolving into her home. Instead of the dark of the dream, she was now seeing the familiar half-light of the night, decorated with the glow of some last embers in the fireplace, and the lights on this year's Christmas tree.

She was on a pillow in front of the fireplace with no memory of how she had gotten there; had one of the humans placed her there, and she just hadn't remembered? Her humans had been especially gentle around her recently, and were always making room for her on their laps. The large human with no hair would even let her sit on his favourite spot, instead of making grumpy noises and moving her out of the way as he used to do. Taking the spots of the humans to make them noisy had been a fun game for her as a younger cat, but the humans weren't playing that game anymore.

The house was almost completely silent, except for the occasional muted crackle from the fire. If any of the humans had been moving she would have heard them. Even if they had been trying to be quiet, which was often the case recently, Jingles knew the humans had no idea just how loud they were. She had never figured out how they fed themselves (and more importantly, her); they would not be good hunters if they made that much noise.

Jingles turned and looked at the Christmas tree; every year a new tree, but the lights and the ornaments were the same, except for the occasional new ornament to replace an old one that had broken. (And it was *never* her fault when an ornament had gotten knocked off the tree.) She slowly got to her feet, and walked over to the tree, and looked up at it, expectantly.

Hello again the tree said.

Jingles was confused; every year was supposed to be a new tree, and this tree was acting as if it knew her.

But I do know you the tree replied. *I was your first tree, your first Christmas.* Jingles heard a tiny noise, and saw a flicker of movement in the reflection of a shiny round Christmas decoration. She edged closer to the decoration, fatigue informing her slowness more than caution. She was curious of course; after all she was still a cat.

In the decoration she saw a young kitten looking up at the tree. How had that cat gotten in her house without Jingles knowing about it? She turned quickly to confront the kitten, but the room was empty. She turned back and looked back at the decoration. She could still see the reflection of that kitten; how could some kitten sneak into her house and hide so easily when Jingles had turned her head, maybe not as quickly as she would have done in the past, but quickly enough. She turned her head around again, as quickly as she was able to try to catch the kitten, but again the room was empty.

That is not just any kitten said the tree. *Do you not recognize yourself?*

Jingles turned back to the decoration; the reflection of the young kitten had been replaced by a reflection of an older cat, obviously in the prime of her life; running, stalking, pouncing on prey real and imagined. And the young human was in the reflection, clumsily petting the cat, who was tolerating it with the innate good grace possessed by all cats. But this was impossible! The young human had grown up, and no longer lived in Jingle's house.

Impossible now, said the tree *but not if you look back through the Christmases that have marked your life. And I have watched you, every Christmas.*

But you were on the fire, every year! How can it be you? Jingles protested.

There is more than branches, bark and pine needles to a Christmas tree came the reply. *Just like the kitten you were is gone, but she lived on in the cat you became.*

What are you made of? Jingles asked.

I am made of memories. I am made of love.

Jingles continued to peer into the reflections of the Christmas decorations, and saw the memories the tree had spoken of. Memories of Jingles, memories of the humans, memories of her own kittens. Jingles sat for hours, unable to stop gazing on all her Christmas memories. But eventually, her head began to nod, and the fatigue that was her constant companion this Christmas began to pull her into its embrace.

My Christmas gift to you the Christmas tree murmured to her as she fell back asleep.

In a while Jingles woke, and found herself back in front of the fire. The embers were still glowing faintly, long past the point of flame, but there was still warmth.

Thank you she thought towards the fire.

There have been so many fires came the reply. *Roaring blazes, and the final flickers. But our glow was always there. And night after night, long after the humans had gone to sleep, you curled up beside us, and kept us company. We thank you for your gift.*

What gift was that? Jingles asked.

The gift of companionship. Friendship. The glow that lasts beyond the last spark.

With that, the fire fell silent, but Jingles still felt the warmth of friendship as she fell back asleep. And it was again a deep sleep.

After an unknown time of darkness, Jingles woke again. The fire was completely out, but she did not feel cold. The lights on the tree were still twinkling. From where she lay Jingles was able to look out a window, and see stars. Bright and so far away. But they seemed closer tonight.

They were never all that far away. That is where I live. Jingles heard another voice in her head. She turned and saw an adult cat before her. It had been a long, long time since she had seen this cat, but Jingles knew immediately who it was.

Mother.

Yes.

It has been so long, Mother.

Yes it has, but I have been watching, and waiting.

Waiting for what, Mother?

To go on a walk with you. And with that Jingles found herself outside her house, with her mother beside her. How had she gotten outside without a human leaving a door open? It had been a long time since Jingles had been outside, not since her kitten had gotten out and run into the forest.

There was a lot of snow on the ground. It was a cold winter's night, but Jingles did not feel the cold at all. The wind was picking up, and it was starting to snow, rather heavily. She

was surrounded by swirling snow flakes, but she felt untouched by the storm that had appeared so suddenly.

Where are we walking, Mother?

To somewhere you've already been came the response from her mother. *To where we all come from, and where we all return.*

Will I be coming back? Jingles asked, looking back at her home, but even as she asked the question she already sensed the answer.

No. Like every human Christmas, we all have a beginning and an end.

My humans will miss me; can I have a chance to say good-bye?

Yes they will miss you; they love you, and will have so many good memories of you.

Even when I was naughty?

Even when you were naughty; those times will be some of their most precious memories of you.

I wish I could be naughty one more time, but I am so tired.

You are tired because it is time for your rest.

Could I see them one more time? Jingles asked. Her mother sighed.

You always were my most demanding kitten, she replied. *I think we can let you have your own way, one last time.*

The forest scene faded, and Jingles was back in her house, sitting on the pillow by the fireplace. It was morning, and her humans had made another fire.

Hello Jingles said to the fire. *Thank you for keeping me warm.*

You will be warm always the fire replied.

Jingles turned and looked towards the Christmas tree. She wanted to rise and walk towards it, but she found she couldn't. This should have been scary and upsetting, but somehow it wasn't. And she knew the tree was watching, and would hear her.

Thank you for making every Christmas special. I will miss you.

You will see me again, the Christmas tree replied, *in a place where Christmas never ends.*

Then Jingles was surrounded by her humans. Even the young human had come back home, and she had brought a very young human kitten of her own. Jingles was very happy to have been able to see her, one last time. And to see her young kitten! What a treat! The young one reached out with a smile and petted her, very gently for such a young one. Her other humans were also petting her, giving her lovely scratches behind her ears, and

murmuring in low comforting sounds. She could see tears, even from the the tall grumpy one with no hair. Somehow, Jingles found the strength to purr.

It is time now? asked the voice of her mother in her head.

Yes it is replied Jingles. With her last bit of energy she looked up at the tree one last time and saw her reflection in an ornament, and then she was drawn into the reflection. She was surrounded by light and colour, like she herself was a Christmas light, in a Christmas tree that seemed to stretch out forever in every direction. Her mother was beside her, and indeed every other cat that had gone before her. She felt she could jump for joy, like she was a kitten again, and so she did, and every other cat with her. And now Jingles completely understood.

She was Christmas, and she was truly home.