

Jingles and the Christmas Tree

by John Meadows

Jingles the kitten was certain of a great many things.

For starters, she knew her name was Jingles; it was the sound she heard when her humans called her when her dinner was ready (even though she knew from across the house when she heard and smelled her meal being prepared), the sounds heard when her humans wanted to play with her or scratch between her ears, or the rather louder sound she heard when her humans did not appreciate the way she was playing. She had not been here all that long, but it had been long enough that she felt she knew everything to know about this space that was her home: every favourite space for her to curl up and nap in, those spots that made her humans make loud noises if they caught her there (making them special night time places to visit.)

She knew every spot where she could gaze at a larger outside world, watching creatures scurry on the ground or flutter in the air. She knew that if she ever got outside, she would spend her days hunting and catching those creatures. She didn't know how she knew all this, but she was supremely certain of it. She did not appreciate her certainty being challenged by anything she did not understand, so when her humans brought in a large green object (the kind she had seen when looking outside) she was not amused.

She was even less amused when she saw her humans gather around the large object, placed in the centre of the largest room in the house, her room! (Well all the rooms in the house were her room, but still!). It was much too close to one of her favourite places to sleep; this would not do! She cautiously approached it, moving slowly and keeping close to the floor, then reached out a paw to bat at it. When she did that, the largest of the humans (the one that had the most fur on its face, but strangely not on the top of its head) reached down and swiftly picked Jingles up and put her aside rather abruptly, beside the smallest and loudest of the humans: the one that Jingles preferred to stay away from, as it was so unpredictable. This day was not going well at all!

Jingles watched from her exile as the two larger humans continued to gather around the large green object, fastening all manner of coloured shiny objects to it. And then in an instant the furry human did something, and Jingles saw lights brightly shining. Jingles felt no warmth coming from them, unlike the larger yellow light she liked to curl up beside, and these lights were not like the brightest light of all that she often saw when looking out at the outside world; it was too bright to look at, but often gave her warmth in which to bask.

Jingles did not understand at all what was happening, and she did not like it at all; she certainly wasn't used to it; one of the things she felt certain of was that as a cat, she was entitled to a great many things, and one of those was a sense of order and today it had been taken from her. Even her humans (who had become more or less predictable) were different today; as the day wore on whenever Jingles walked by the large green object, she became aware of the two larger humans stopping whatever they were doing and watching her, until she had moved a certain distance from the object. At one point when she walked by her tail casually flicked out

and knocked one of the coloured objects off the larger green object. That seemed to get a reaction from the largest furry human who stomped over and shooed her away. How dare he? She made a point thereafter to casually walk by the large green object as often as possible, flicking her tail every time. Nothing else fell off, but she knew the large furry human was watching her, and having it under her control made it fun.

The smallest human also reached out to touch the large green object, and managed to knock something off. The middle human (the smallest human's mother? How did show know that?) came and quickly scooped the smallest human up; The smallest human began to make a lot of noise, and Jingles sensed the large furry human getting agitated. Nothing about this day was going as it should have!

But at least part of the day was predictable, as the outside light faded as it aways did. Jingles saw the lights on the large green object shining more brightly. The furry human then made the large warm light appear; this light snapped and crackled and danced, and gave off a delicious warmth. Jingles curled up in front of the light and purred. Finally, all was right with the world, at least for the moment.

Until she woke with a start. It was the middle of the dark time; her humans were asleep, as they normally were at this time, the time when the house should have been hers and hers alone. She looked up and saw that the large green object was still there, intruding into her world. It seemed to rustle in the quiet, and the snaps and crackles from the warm yellow light had gone silent, as it always did at this time. The large green object made no sound, but it still seemed to be calling out to Jingles and she felt drawn to it, so she slowly made her way over to it. She sat silently before it, regarding it with unblinking eyes.

One of the colourful objects caught her eye. It was a round ball, and reflected the coloured light coming from a nearby light. As she peered in more intently Jingles thought she noticed some movement, so she moved in close — there was another kitten, moving closer to her! Closer, ever closer she drew, and Jingles saw the other kitten doing the exact same thing! She moved right up to the ball, close enough to touch noses with the other kitten, but it felt hard cold, not at all like a kitten's nose was supposed to feel! She jumped back and stared balefully at the other kitten; she did not like things she did not understand, and judging by the expression on the other kitten's face, it was also irritated by the mystery.

Silly kitten a voice suddenly said inside Jingles' head. Jingles jumped back even further. Who was speaking to her, and how was she able to understand? The voice did not sound threatening, but it was another surprise in a day that already had had too many surprises for her liking.

Who are you? Jingles thought back to the voice in her head.

I am an ornament on the Christmas Tree replied the voice. So that was what the large green thing was called, Jingles thought to herself. And she also knew the word "decoration", at least in her head. How was she learning these things?

Come closer the voice of the decoration said. Jingles edged closer, and saw that the other cat was doing likewise. *That is your reflection*, said the voice. Jingles had another moment of realization as she understood she was somehow looking at herself. She was certainly learning a lot this night!

I and the other ornaments bring colour and beauty to the tree, the ornament continued. *The humans like to look at pretty things like us.*

Why? Replied Jingles in her head.

Christmas, was the reply. Images of celebration began flooding into Jingles mind; It was a kaleidoscope of colour and light and sound, and it felt like too much at once for her. She turned and ran back to the comfortable familiarity of her spot by the warm light, and sidled up to the remaining warmth. The voice in her head had fallen silent, and the images that had overwhelmed her were easing. After a few minutes her desire for a nap overcame her kitten's curiosity and the wonder in her head.

In the morning Jingles stirred suddenly; the biggest human with the furry face was beside the Christmas tree and he did not seem very happy. He was crouching down on the floor, looking at something. Jingles crept closer and saw that it was an ornament; somehow its had fallen from the tree and shattered on the floor during the night. The human turned and looked Jingles in the eye; Jingle crouched down and backed away; she did not know how the ornament had fallen, but it was obvious the large human was blaming her; she had seen that look before. She had broken things before, and it had been fun, but not this time, She did not want the ornament to be broken. And this time she did not want the large human angry at her.

Throughout the day she could feel his eyes on her constantly, and she made a point of giving the tree a wide berth whenever she walked by it. Even so, the large human would dash over quickly and get between her and the tree. It might have felt like a game once, but not today.

The day seemed to drag on forever in a strained silence, but eventually it did end, and night fell, giving Jingles her solitude. Just like the night before, Jingles curled up in front of the warm crackling light to snooze. The light and warmth were there every night, and at least they were never angry at her. But again, Jingles woke suddenly, and looked up at the Christmas tree.

The lights looked especially bright against the backdrop of the night, and they seemed to be calling out to her. The large human was asleep so she edged cautiously towards the tree. She sat before the tree and regarded the lights for some time, before she heard another voice in her head.

We are the lights she head the voice say. The ornaments seem to think they are the centre of attention, but without the light that we gift to them, they are nothing, hiding in the dark, or shattering on the floor. And Christmas without light cannot be Christmas. Gaze upon us and wonder.

Jingles sat and looked at the lights; There were so many different colours! They twinkled and sparkled, and reminded Jingles of the lights she could see some nights when she looked out into the outside world. But they felt cold and distant and did not provide her the friendly warmth that she was used to, so she turned and made her way back to to familiar light. The light had become quiet, with no snaps or crackles; the bright yellows had eased into gentle oranges hues, as Jingles knew it did every day. The familiar friendly warmth was still there , like a friend. Jingles purred her contentment and began her nap.

Only to be woken in the morning by the large furry human who again was sitting by the tree, again making noises that sounded angry. The lights on the tree had gone dark, and in fact were no longer on the tree, but stretched out in a straight line on the floor. The human was doing something with the lights, over and over, each time making another angry sound when the lights stayed dark. At one point the human looked over at Jingles, who knew enough to keep her distance this morning.

If Jingles had been capable of shrugging she would have shrugged, if only to tell the human that she had done nothing to cause the issue with the lights, that it was not her fault, but

all she could do was watch helplessly from a distance, as the sounds of frustration continued from the large human. Then finally the lights came back, and the sound that came from the large human was a happier one.

The rest of the day was a calm and happy one, and Jingles enjoyed watching the lights on the Christmas tree, but she still didn't want to get too close, in case the large human got angry. It was much better to sit in front of the warm, snapping crackling light. She spent much of the day there, but she did spend some time looking at the outside world; she could now recognize other trees as part of that world. They did not have lights or ornaments, but somehow they found a way to glint and sparkle prettily as the brightest light of all coursed overhead.

The day wore on as all days did and when the outdoor light faded Jingles returned to her spot in front of the warm light. All of the humans seemed very busy, or at least active, but in a happy way. Maybe because of Christmas, and so were not paying too much attention to Jingles. Ordinarily Jingles expected to be the centre of attention, and ordinarily she would have been annoyed, but with all the changes and new things she didn't mind being left alone. And she never felt alone when she was in front of the warm light. It was a evening of purring and nuzzles.

But again during the night Jingles woke suddenly, and again felt herself being called to the Christmas tree again, so she slowly and carefully made her way over, knowing the humans were asleep and would not see her. And again she sat before the tree. The lights were dazzling but still cold; the ornaments pretty but Jingles still sensed their fragility. And somehow there was some tension in the air.

Without us your beauty will never be seen the lights seemed to be saying to the ornaments. *Without just to reflect your light, what purpose do you have?* the ornaments seemed

to say in reply. And then a sullen silence. The lights flickered as if they were struggling to stay lit, and Jingles thought she saw one or two of the ornaments twist or shiver as if in anticipation of falling from the tree to a shattering end on the floor.

Then Jingles heard a new sound in her head. Not a word but a sigh. And such a sigh! Jingles knew she was still young, but this sigh was full of experience and sadness that she knew she could not understand, but only feel.

Who are you? she wondered inside her mind.

I am the tree came the answer.

Why are you so sad? Jingles asked.

My time is almost over the tree answered. *My life was in the forest, but I knew I would spend my last days somewhere with a family for Christmas. I am a home for lights and ornaments, and I will have but one Christmas. One Christmas and I all see are the lights and the ornaments bickering, each thinking that Christmas revolves around them. But without me the lights and ornaments have no home; they might as well stay in a box. They will know Christmas after Christmas, year after year, long after I am gone.*

Where are you going? Jingles asked. The answer was another sigh, and something made Jingles turn around and look at the softly glowing light that had given her warmth day after day. And somehow she now knew the name of that light. Fire.

My time will end with me giving warmth to others, warmth to you, and this is something the lights and the ornaments cannot do. It is my destiny, and I can accept that, but could they at least spare a thought for me? The reproach hung heavily in the silence, clear and stark. Jingles could sense some shame on the part of the lights and ornaments, and she herself was thinking

about how she had always taken the warmth of the fire for granted, not knowing what had given her that gift.

Jingles arose and went straight to the base of the tree; she circled the tree a couple of times, then lay down, curled around the trunk. *Let me keep you warm this night* she thought to the tree. There was no response in words from the tree, but she thought that if a tree could smile, then maybe this tree, her tree was smiling now. Jingles began to purr, and drifted into sleep.

In the morning she awoke to the sound of her humans stirring. She realized she was still curled around the tree, and the large furry human was looking at her, but in a calm way. The small human was being held by her mother, and was pointing and making happy noises. Even the lights and the decorations had ceased their silent bickering, and were allowing a moment of joy to unfurl unhindered.

This is your Christmas and I will always remember you Jingles thought to the tree. She sensed a silent, simple *thank you* in return. And for the entirety of that day she remained curled around the tree, holding on tight to her friend, giving every bit of warmth that she had. Because it was Christmas.