

Holy Night

A 'Xmas Tale



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The snow fell with a peculiar heaviness that Christmas night, each flake landing against the cottage windows like a small, deliberate accusation. Nana lay on the rug before the fire, her golden coat catching the light in ways that should have suggested warmth but instead seemed only to emphasise the flatness of her eyes, the profound stillness that had settled into her body like sediment at the bottom of a well.

Her teats ached. Not the satisfying ache of purpose, but something more insistent, more cruel—a bodily insistence on what should have been, what her flesh still prepared for despite the absolute silence where there should have been the blind seeking of small mouths. The milk came regardless of loss. Biology possessed its own terrible momentum, indifferent to grief.

Through the window, beyond the Christmas wreath with its defiant red bow, the village lights flickered through the storm like distant memories of joy. Inside, the cottage held its own warmth—the scent of cloves and cinnamon, the soft glow of candles on the mantelpiece, the gentle crackling of turf in the grate. But Nana existed separate from all of it, enclosed in a space where festivity could not penetrate. Her body curled into itself, nose tucked beneath her tail, as though she might make herself small enough to disappear entirely.

She had licked them, each one. The stillborn puppies with their sealed eyes and perfect, unutterably perfect, paws. Had licked them as instinct demanded, willing warmth into their cooling bodies, her tongue moving in strokes that grew gradually more frantic, more desperate, until the understanding—that particular, devastating clarity—had finally settled into her bones. And then the last one, the one who had breathed. She had hardly dared to move for those few hours, her body a fortress around that singular fragile life, her breath synchronised with its tiny ribs rising and falling. Rising. Falling. Rising. Then only falling.



The doorbell's chime registered somewhere in the periphery of her consciousness but sparked nothing. Voices in the hallway—bright, determined voices carrying the forced cheer of the season—meant nothing. Pádraic's wife, Maeve, had tried earlier, kneeling beside her with hands that smelled of flour and brandy, speaking in those particular tones humans employed when trying to reach across the unbridgeable distance of species and sorrow. Nana had allowed the touch, passive, the woman's fingers moving through her coat without generating any response beyond the mechanical continuation of breathing.

The fire popped. A log shifted, sending sparks up the chimney like tiny, short-lived stars. Outside, the snow continued its relentless accumulation, building drifts against the cottage walls, transforming the familiar landscape into something alien and un-

knowable. The wind carried voices from the village church, the midnight service beginning, hymns threading through the storm with thin persistence.

Then footsteps. The particular weight and rhythm of Pádraic returning from wherever he had gone—she had not noted his departure, time having become something fluid and unreliable. The door opened, bringing a rush of cold air that stirred the candle flames and carried the scent of snow and night and something else, something small and afraid.

He moved towards her with an unusual tentativeness, his boots leaving damp prints on the wooden floor. Through the fog of her grief, Nana registered his presence but could not muster interest. His knees creaked as he lowered himself beside her, and she felt rather than saw him reaching into his jacket, that old waxed thing that smelled of rain and peat smoke.

“Nana,” he said, his voice carrying a strange quality, something between hope and uncertainty. “Nana, girl.”

His hands emerged holding something. A fragment of life so small it seemed impossible—a scrap of grey and white fur, trembling with a violence that spoke of cold and fear and the desperate, clinging will to exist. A kitten. Its eyes were barely open, milky blue slits in a face almost comically tiny. It mewed, a sound so thin it barely qualified as sound at all, more a suggestion of distress than actual protest.

He placed it near her head, this infinitesimal creature, setting it down on the rug with movements of extraordinary care. The kitten wobbled, its legs uncertain beneath it, and mewed again. The sound penetrated something in Nana, reached past the sediment of grief to some deeper place where instinct lived untouched by loss.



She lifted her head.

The kitten smelled of cold and of abandonment—found, her owner would later explain to his wife, in a ditch near the church, likely dumped there by someone who could not face the burden of unwanted life. Its fur was matted and damp, its body

heat barely registering. It fell against her muzzle, too weak to support itself, and the contact triggered something fundamental, something that existed before thought or choice.

Nana began to lick.

Her tongue moved over the kitten's body in long, purposeful strokes, the motion awakening something in her muscles that remembered what to do, how to warm, how to clean, how to claim. The kitten's trembling gradually lessened beneath her ministrations, its thin cry shifting in tone from desperation to something more querulous, more demanding. It butted against her face with sudden determination, instinct overriding fear, seeking what all newborn creatures seek.

Nana shifted her body, a movement that sent small shocks of pain through her swollen teats, and carefully, so carefully, she nosed the kitten downward, guiding it along the curve of her body. The kitten's mouth opened and closed, rooting, its tiny paws suddenly animated with purpose. When it found what it sought, when its mouth closed around her teat and began to suck, the relief was almost overwhelming—not just physical, though that was profound, but something deeper. An answering. A purpose restored.

The kitten's paws kneaded against her, pushing with an intensity remarkable for something so small, and Nana felt the milk let down, felt her body fulfilling its design at last. She curved herself around this improbable child, this wrong species that somehow fit exactly in the space her puppies had left empty, and settled into the ancient rhythm of motherhood. The ache in her teats transformed into something bearable, purposeful. The kitten sucked with greedy determination, small grunting sounds emerging from it as it fed.

Her owner remained beside her for a time, his hand resting lightly on her head, before he stood and quietly left the room.



Time passed in the way it does when measuring is unnecessary. The kitten fed until it could hold no more, its small belly distended, and then simply collapsed against her warmth, its face buried in her fur. Nana shifted to accommodate it, licking its ears, its face, the small twitching paws, each stroke an affirmation. Outside, the storm continued, but the cottage held them in its amber light, the fire burning steady, the snow piling against the windows like a blessing or a barrier against the world's harshness.

When Pádraic returned, Maeve beside him now, her hand tucked into the crook of his elbow, they stood in the doorway without speaking. Nana and the kitten slept together, breath synchronised, the kitten's tiny body rising and falling against Nana's chest in perfect trust. The tableau they made—the golden retriever and the grey kitten, the fire's glow, the snow beyond the window—held something indefinable, something that transcended the simple facts of species and circumstance.

He put his arm around his wife's shoulders, drawing her close, and she leaned into him with a weight that spoke of relief, of tension finally released. They had both feared for Nana, had watched her sink into that place where grief becomes dangerous, where the body's will to continue becomes uncertain.

"It looks like this will be a Holy Night, after all," he said, his voice quiet, almost wondering.

Maeve's hand found his, their fingers interlacing. In the village church, the service would be ending now, the congregation emerging into the snow with candles that would gutter and die in the wind, carrying their light homeward through the storm. Here, in this small cottage with its turf fire and its improbable miracle, a different kind of service had concluded—one without hymns or liturgy, but with its own grace nonetheless.

New life given. New life received. The mathematics of mercy rarely balancing neatly, but balancing all the same.



Nana's ear twitched in sleep, and the kitten mewed softly, burrowing deeper into her warmth. The snow continued falling, would fall through the night and into the morning, blanketing the village in white silence. But inside, the fire burned, and the unlikely family slept, and Christmas arrived not with trumpets or angels but with the simple, profound fact of comfort given and received, of two creatures who had needed each other finding each other at precisely the moment when need was greatest.

The ache in Nana's teats had transformed into something approaching peace. The kitten's breathing remained steady, assured. And in the space between grief and joy, in that liminal territory where healing begins its slow, uncertain work, they rested together while the Holy Night deepened around them.

